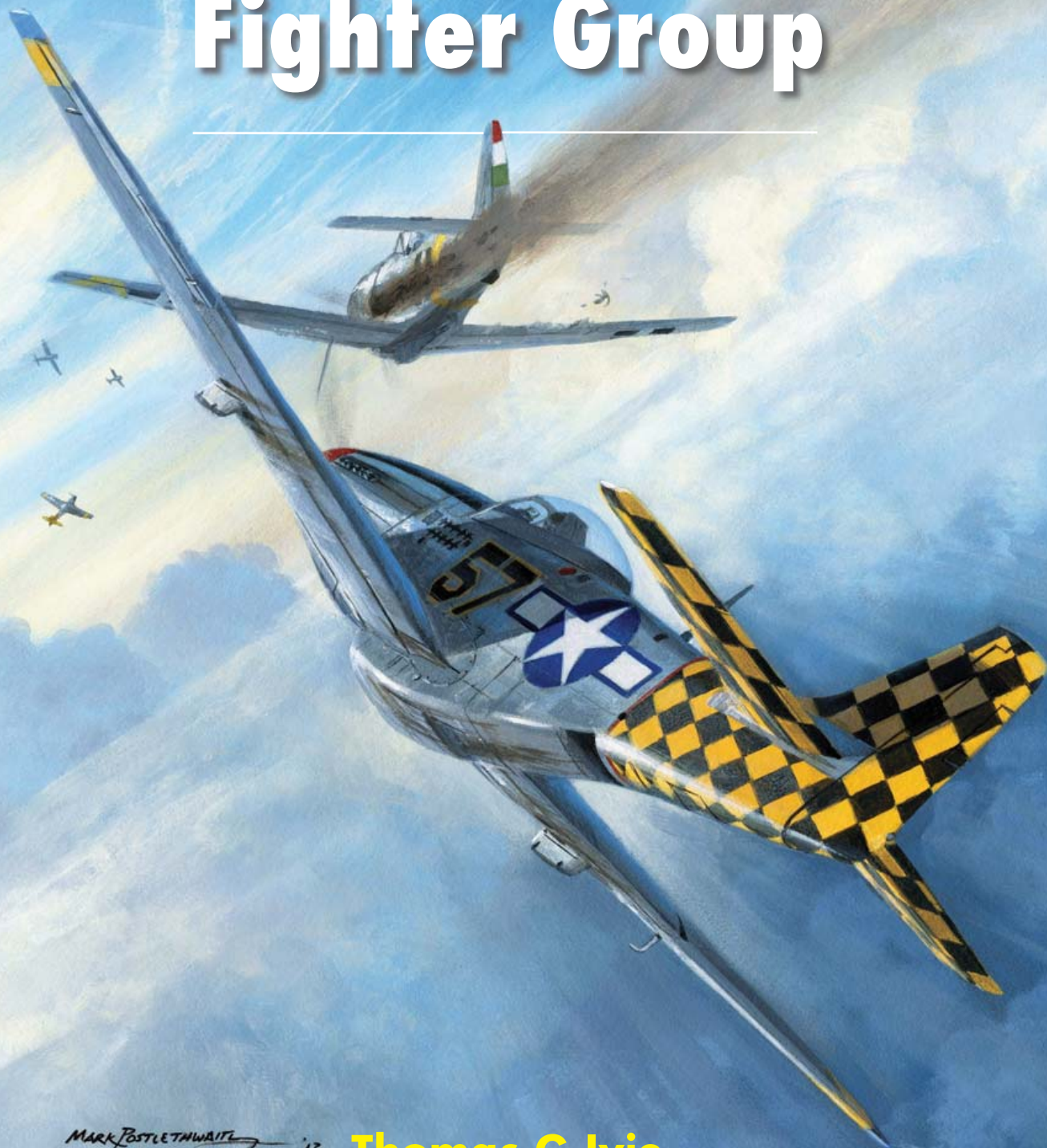




Aces of the 325th Fighter Group



MARK POSTLETHWAITE '17

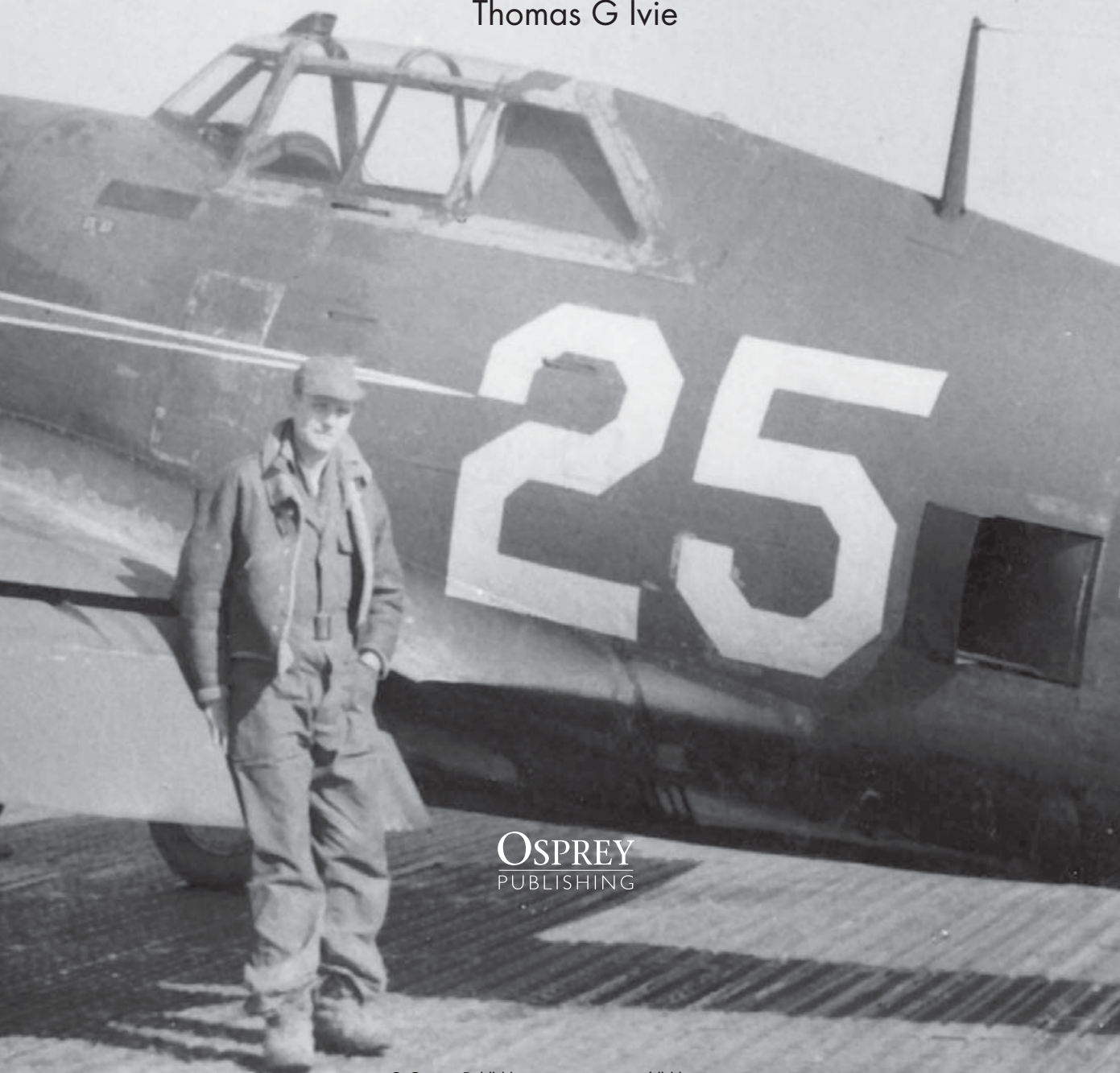
Thomas G Ivie

SERIES EDITOR: TONY HOLMES

OSPREY AIRCRAFT OF THE ACES 117

ACES OF THE 325th FIGHTER GROUP

Thomas G Ivie



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the memory of the late Dwayne Tabatt, who worked so diligently in his position as the 325th FG Association's photo archivist. His efforts insured that a very large number of images of the group's personnel and aircraft would be available for researchers to use for many years. As such, he gave me numerous photographs to use should I be able to get a book contract and tell the story of the 'Checkertails'. After his death the remainder of his collection was given to my colleague, and fellow Osprey author, Carl Molesworth for safekeeping. Virtually all of the images used in this book are due to Dwayne's generosity and dedication to the telling of the 325th FG history.

The author would also like to thank the following individuals for their generous help in the preparation of this book. My old friend, and fellow Osprey author, William N Hess, provided all of the 325th's mission summaries and numerous letters and documents received from former 'Checkertail' pilots that were extremely important in the preparation of this book. The microfilm of the 'Checkertail Clan's' encounter reports, provided by Frank Olynyk, was invaluable in preparing this history. Carl Molesworth supplied numerous photographs from the Tabatt collection, as well as 325th FG documentation that augmented the narrative of this book. Other photographs came from the late Lt Col Lewis W Chick, the late Col Chester Sluder and from the National Museum of the US Air Force. Finally, thanks to my friend Sam Sox for using his 'magic' to enhance the quality of several images published in this volume.

Finally, thank you to my wife, Mary, for proofreading the manuscript and offering suggestions on how it could be improved.

Tom Ivie
Taylor Mill
Kentucky, USA
July 2013

ACTIVATION, TRAINING AND INTO COMBAT

Probably one of the most feared symbols an Axis pilot in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations (MTO) could see in the air were the bright yellow and black 'checkerboard tails' of the 325th FG. There was a good reason for this concern, as the 'Checkertail Clan' was one of the deadliest fighter groups in the MTO. Indeed, by war's end its pilots had downed 534 Axis aircraft in aerial combat, making the 325th the second highest scoring unit (behind the 82nd FG – see *Osprey Aircraft of the Aces 108 – P-38 Lightning Aces of the 82nd Fighter Group* for further details) in the Fifteenth Air Force. The 325th produced a total of 28 aces during its combat tour, which began in April 1943 in the skies over North Africa and ended in Italy two years later.

General Order 50, dated 30 June 1942, issued by Headquarters First Air Force, Eastern Defense Command, activated the 325th FG. The order authorised the detaching of officers and enlisted men from the 79th FG under the command of Maj Leonard C Lydon as a cadre around which the 325th FG was to be formed. The new group was composed of the 317th, 318th and 319th Fighter Squadrons. Initially, HQ 325th FG and the 317th Fighter Squadron (FS) were sent to Theodore Green Field at Hillsgrove, Rhode Island, while the 318th and 319th FSs set up shop at Grenier Field in Manchester, New Hampshire.

As the units settled in at their respective bases the training of both flying and ground personnel began in earnest. We will take a look at the training period through the eyes of the 317th FS, which was activated



In January 1943 P-40Fs of the 325th FG were loaded aboard USS *Ranger* (CV-4) and shipped across the treacherous waters of the Atlantic to North Africa (National Museum of the USAF)

on 3 August 1942 with 1Lt James E Tucker as its first commanding officer. During the next several days personnel began rolling in and the unit began its organisational setup. Operational training began shortly thereafter when the 317th received 12 P-40Es from the 86th FS. The squadron history noted that;

‘Intense, vigorous training missions were scheduled in interception, ground gunnery tactics, dive-bombing and simulated dogfights. P-40s were idle only when bogged down by weather, flying from dawn to dusk and frequently at night. On 7 October Capt Jack C West was appointed squadron commander, relieving Lt Tucker who was transferred to Headquarters, 325th FG. On 13 October SSgt Watkins Mayo was killed when his aeroplane crashed at Norwood, Massachusetts. On 23 December Lt Bart Judge failed to return from a routine training mission, and it was not until several months later that the squadron learned he had crashed to his death’.

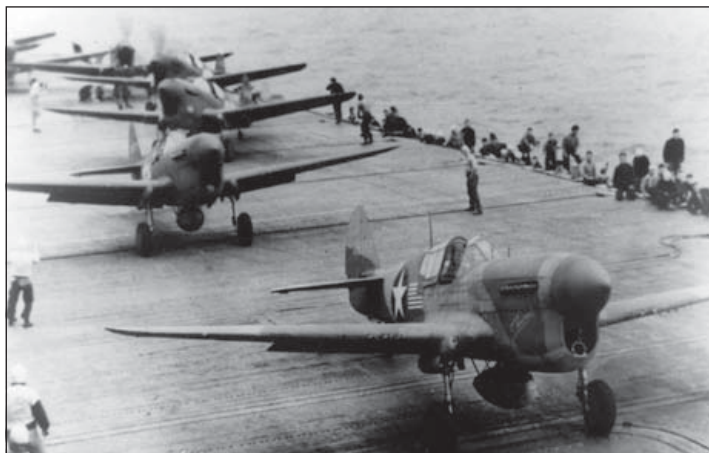
A change of command occurred on 10 December 1942 when Lt Col Gordon H Austin replaced Maj Leonard Lydon as commanding officer of the 325th FG. By now the group had nearly reached its authorised strength, and during the remainder of December Lt Col Austin quickly brought the 325th up to combat readiness.

The new year started on a positive note for the group as it received orders to move to Langley Field, Virginia, on 1 January 1943. The pilots headed for their new home by train the following day, and upon their arrival they found that they had been equipped with mostly brand new P-40Fs. It was whilst at Langley Field that the pilots learned that they and their aircraft would be shipped to North Africa aboard the aircraft carrier USS *Ranger* (CV-4). Having reached their destination, the Warhawk pilots would have to fly their P-40s off the vessel as the carrier sailed in open waters. For the next few days the squadrons spent time practising takeoffs from a simulated carrier deck. This training ended on 6 January, and 24 hours later the P-40s were flown to Norfolk Naval Yard, where they were loaded aboard *Ranger*. On 8 January the carrier and its screening ships sailed for the combat zone of North Africa.

After a virtually uneventful voyage *Ranger* arrived at the point of takeoff and pilots were ordered to man their aeroplanes. The carrier takeoffs and flight to Casablanca were performed without incident, and soon the group was safely ashore at Cazes airfield, in French Morocco. The air and ground echelons left the US a few days after the pilots and their aeroplanes, and by 1 March 1943 the entire 325th FG had finally been reunited at Tafaraoui airfield, about 30 miles from Oran.

During February 1943 the group had to turn over some of its P-40s to the veteran 33rd FG, which needed replacement aircraft to continue supporting the ground forces in western Tunisia. As a result of this the 325th retained

On 19 January 1943 *Ranger* reached the launching point off North Africa and the 325th's pilots flew their P-40s off the carrier and headed for Cazes airfield near Casablanca, in French Morocco. All arrived safely (National Museum of the USAF)





Future ace Lt Frank 'Spot' Collins shot down a Bf 109 on 6 May 1943 for his first kill. He ended his tour of duty with a total of nine victories, as well as one probable and one damaged (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth)

only 38 Warhawks when its final operational training began in March. This shortage of aircraft meant that when the group was declared combat ready in early April, only two of its squadrons could be sent to the 325th's new base at Montesquieu, in Algeria. The squadrons drew straws to see which one would have to remain behind, and the 317th FS lost. The 318th and 319th FSs moved to their new base during the first two weeks of April, and by the 15th they were settled in and ready for combat operations.

The 325th FG's first mission took place two days later, escorting bombers attacking the airfield at

Mateur. Enemy aircraft were encountered over the target area, and during a brief engagement with two Bf 109s, Flt Off Howard Cook of the 318th FS destroyed one of them before he was himself shot down by another Messerschmitt. He bailed out and was later picked up by British forces. No bombers were lost – this was the first of 59 straight escort missions where no bombers were lost to enemy fighters.

During the next 30 days the 325th flew 24 missions that saw its pilots perform bomber escort, dive-bombing and strafing. The fast faltering Luftwaffe was encountered just once, on 6 May 1943. On that date the 318th and 319th FSs flew a sea sweep between Cap Bon and Cap Serrat, and left several vessels burning after they were bombed.

Following these attacks, Lts Frank Collins and Harmon E Burns and Flt Offs Richard Catlin and Edmund Parent became separated from the rest of the formation and headed back to base. On their homeward flight they spotted a Luftwaffe airfield packed with 20 Ju 52/3ms, so they strafed them. As they pulled up a number of the tri-motor transports were observed burning on the field. Future ace Lt 'Spot' Collins then saw a Bf 109 in the landing pattern, and with a few bursts from his 0.50-cal machine guns he sent it crashing to earth in flames. At about the same time Lt Burns spotted a Ju 52/3m flying nearby at an altitude of 1000 ft and quickly shot it down too, the transport crashing into the sea.

One week later the campaign in North Africa ended with the surrender of Generaloberst Hans-Jürgen von Arnim, commander of the *Afrika Korps*.

The 325th FG would now be flying missions against Axis-held islands in the Mediterranean. The first such target was Sardinia, with the group undertaking a combination escort/dive-bombing mission against Porto Ponte Romano. The Luftwaffe was not encountered, but the 325th's dive-bombing resulted in severe damage in the harbour area.

By mid-May the 317th FS was at last up to full strength, and it joined the remainder of the group. The unit flew its first mission on 19 May, escorting bombers sent to attack Decimomannu airfield on Sardinia.

Future ace Herschel H Green recalled the day's events, which remained firmly entrenched in his memory decades later;

'The "old timers" who had been flying combat for only a few weeks told us that we were lucky to have joined them at that time because there had been little action on the escort missions, and we would have the chance to break into combat slowly. WRONG.'

The target was obscured by heavy clouds, and the results of the bombing were questionable. There was no question about the ferocity of the resistance offered by defending Axis fighters, however. In the first of a series of encounters three Bf 109s were shot down over Cagliari, two more southwest of Cap Frasca and one 15 miles east of Cap Frasca. Individual credits of one victory each went to Maj Bob Baseler (a future ace), 1Lt Joseph Bloomer Jr, Herschel H 'Herky' Green and Lawrence Ritter and Flt Offs John Smallsreed and Ebert W Smith. 'Herky' Green described his first mission, and victory, as follows;

'We flew into Sardinia and my section of four aeroplanes was attacked just as we crossed the coastline. In short order we became separated, and I found myself tangling with six or eight Me 109s, and was fast losing control of the situation. They were attacking me from both sides, so no matter which way I turned I just set myself up for somebody else. After a few minutes of this – it seemed like a lifetime – I realised that there was no way I could live in this environment for more than a few seconds. Our P-40s could out-turn the Me 109s, but that was all we could do. We couldn't out-run them.

'While attempting to evade a bunch of tracers that were trying to occupy the same area as I was I spun out and went into an undercast over which we had drifted by this time. This was my salvation as I recovered and headed home, staying in the clouds as long as I could. Although my aeroplane was riddled and most of my instruments and radio were shot away I managed to get back to North Africa without further incident. During the melee I had shot down one Me 109, but at the time it seemed hardly worth it.'

'Herky's' victory was scored during a head-on pass, and it was confirmed by Capt W R Reed, who witnessed the engagement.

Lt Green's P-40, side number '13', had been shot so full of holes that it was consigned to the scrapyard, and as far as Green was concerned so was the number '13'. After this hair-raising ordeal he switched to side number '11', which he had applied to all of his remaining assigned aircraft.

Two P-40s were lost in these

Some of the battle damage to Herschel H 'Herky' Green's P-40F '13', after his narrow escape during the aerial battle of 19 May 1943. Although Green scored his first kill during this dogfight, he was fortunate to escape with his life during an action that saw him chased by six to eight Bf 109s (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)



Lt Col Robert Baseler poses with USO stalwarts Frances Langford and Bob Hope in front of Baseler's P-40F 41-20006 *STUD/Mortimer SNERD* at Mateur, in Tunisia, during August 1943. The aircraft bore the number '88' on its fuselage (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth)

dogfights, Lt Charles Housel bailing out and Lt D R Brown crashing to his death.

Since the accuracy of the bombing on 19 May had left something to be desired, a second mission against Decimomannu was ordered for the following day. This time the bombing results were excellent. As the 325th FG went down to strafe the few remaining targets on the airfield, 16 enemy fighters arrived on the scene and a dogfight quickly ensued. During the engagement the 325th downed six enemy aircraft, and claimed a seventh as a probable. Frank 'Spot' Collins, with his second victory, reported;

'At 1155 hrs I shot down one Me 109 from about 7000 ft in a diving attack just west of Decimomannu landing ground. The Me 109 came in from the east, and I saw it crash into the ground just west of Siligna. The pilot did not bail out.'

The other kills were scored by Capt Everett Howe and Lts Harold Crossley, William Lott and Arthur McDaniel. Lt Thomas Johnson was hit and made a forced landing in the sea.

A second flight led by Col Austin spotted a flight of seven huge Me 323 transports and shot them all down. Col Austin, Lts John Tuchson and John Grove and Flt Offs David McCampbell, Archie McKeithen and John Smallsreed each claimed one of the six-engined giants.

The 325th FG returned to Decimomannu on 21 May and claimed four more kills, although it suffered two losses in the process. The first two victories were scored by Lts Grove and Frank Hamilton, but they were both, in turn, bounced and shot down by more enemy fighters. The final two kills were claimed by Capt William Reed and Lt John Palmer.



These victories ended the 325th's scoring for a few days. During the next week the group turned its attention to targets on the island of Pantelleria. It attacked airfields, harbour defences and port facilities, all of which were thoroughly worked over with machine gun fire and bombs. Several small vessels were damaged or sunk in the harbour and a number of freighters were damaged during the attacks, but at the cost of two pilots.

All squadrons were up and escorting B-26s to Decimomannu on 27 May when a mixed force of 35 German and Italian fighters attacked the bombers. Maj Bob Baseler led his flight down to break up the attack, and during a spirited dogfight he and his men downed six enemy fighters – four Bf 109s and two Italian Macchi C.202s. Maj Baseler and newly promoted Maj E B Howe each downed a C.202 and the four Bf 109s were credited to 'Spot' Collins, John Smallsreed, Dick Catlin and Mark Boone. Lt Collins, apparently a man of few words, described his third kill in the following encounter report;

'At 1850 hrs I shot down a Me 109 from about 3000 ft over the sea at a point about four miles east of Cape Spartivento. The effective hits were fired into the enemy aircraft at a quarterly angle as it was in combat with another P-40. The pilot of the Me 109 evidently was not aware of my approach from above and in the rear of him. The Me 109 dove into the sea and the pilot did not get out.'

Lt Bill Hemphill was hit during the dogfight and he had to ditch in the sea. Flt Off Catlin saw him, dropped a life raft and radioed for Air-Sea Rescue. Hemphill was picked up by an RAF Walrus, which, tragically, crashed on takeoff and all aboard were killed.

Mission 44 for the 325th on 28 May 1943 was another bomber escort, this time to Trapani-Milo airfield on the island of Sicily. 'Herky' Green reported that Bf 109s attacked the bomber formation east of the target and continued the fight out to sea;

'Ten miles off the coast, at 9000 ft, I saw a Me 109 far below me. I rolled over and went after him, firing on the way down. As the range shortened, he pulled up and I did likewise, firing into him. I then went over him and climbed, before rolling over and diving after him again, shooting on the way. To keep from hitting the water I pulled up and climbed to 9000 ft again, blacking out for a moment. When I looked for the Me 109 again I could find no trace of him.'

At the interrogation after this mission it was reported by Maj Howe that he and several other pilots saw a Bf 109 plunge into the water at the point described. Victory number two was confirmed for Green. Two other pilots, Lt Rayburn Lancaster and Flt Off Bruce Cunningham, added to the day's total, with each of them destroying a Bf 109. Sadly, the 325th lost a talented pilot and potential ace during the mission when Flt Off John Smallsreed, who had scored his third victory only the day before, was listed as missing in action (MIA) – no one had seen what had happened to him.

On 29 and 31 May the 325th returned to Pantelleria to attack gun emplacements by dive-bombing with 500-lb bombs. On the second of these missions, while escorting B-26s and carrying 1000-lb bombs, the group targeted an oil dump and several gun emplacements. It should be mentioned here that the 325th FG was the first P-40 outfit in the MTO to deliver 1000 'pounders' on enemy targets.

1 June 1943 found 36 P-40s from the group heading for Sicily in an early morning strafing attack on Stagnone seaplane anchorage. 325th records stated;

‘The group, attacking in flights, came in down on the deck over the seawall protecting the anchorage from the open sea. The early hour caught the enemy completely by surprise. Twelve seaplanes were destroyed and six others left burning. These seaplanes were used to ferry supplies from the mainland to Sicily. Maj Bob Baseler, who was credited with destroying two of them, later commented, “We just snuck in on them before anyone was moving around and were out before they really knew what had hit them”. While hitting other targets on the island of Sicily flak downed the P-40 flown by Lt Thomas Johnson, who was killed when his aircraft exploded.’

The next opportunity for engaging the Luftwaffe occurred on 6 June 1943 during a dive-bombing mission to Pantelleria. Five P-40s carried 1000-lb bombs while 18 others provided escort. As the dive-bombers were attacking targets on the ground 25 Bf 109s intercepted them, apparently not noticing the top cover. In the ensuing dogfight six Bf 109s went down under the guns of the 325th pilots. One of the kills was scored by Flt Off Charles Engle, who later reported;

‘I had a bird’s eye view of the whole business. They didn’t seem to notice our high cover, and about 12 of them started down after the P-40s on the deck. My flight turned and dove after them. I lined up on one, gave him a little lead and he flew right through my burst. His aeroplane seemed to stand still, roll over and plunge straight down into the sea.’

Between 7 and 10 June 12 escort missions were flown to Pantelleria. Six of these were undertaken on the 10th, and during the last two on this date enemy aircraft were encountered. The fifth mission had taken off at 1400 hrs to escort B-26s of the 320th Bomb Group (BG) and dive-bomb assigned positions on Pantelleria. Over the island the B-26s were targeted by a mixed force of about 25 Italian and German fighters, and the 325th’s P-40s dove into the fray to break up the Axis attack. In the following dogfight three Bf 109s were shot down by Lts Herbert Andridge, Lawrence Ritter and Kenneth Rusher for the loss of Flt Off Jim Dunlap, who did not return to base. Four other Bf 109s were claimed as damaged during the dogfight.

The sixth mission of the day took off at 1440 hrs, and this time the 325th

was escorting B-26s of the 319th BG. Again, the P-40s would dive-bomb assigned targets on Pantelleria. Over the target, 14 Bf 109s were seen approaching the bombers and they were bounced by the 325th. Two of the Bf 109s were downed by Capt Ralph ‘Zack’ Taylor and a third was destroyed by ‘friendly flak’. Future ace Capt Taylor described his dogfight actions as follows;

‘The group was dive-bombing gun positions on Pantelleria, and also escorting B-26s of the 319th BG that were level bombing the same targets. Flying rear cover, I was

Capt Ralph ‘Zack’ Taylor is seen relaxing on the wing of his P-40L-1 42-10436 ‘13’ before the name *Duchess of Durham IV* and pin-up nose art had been added to its cowling. Taylor would score five of his six confirmed victories in this aircraft (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth)



on the left when my flight was attacked simultaneously by three Me 109s from the side and two Me 109s diving from the rear. Lt Crawford and his wingman turned to meet the three coming from the side while I turned into those diving from the rear. I shot at one of the Me 109s and saw him start smoking, then crash into the water at a point two miles due west of the island.

'In the dogfight off the Pantellerian coast, after seeing the first Me 109 crash I pulled behind another Me 109 that did not see me coming. Firing from dead astern, I saw him roll over and start downward toward the water at a point three miles west of the westernmost tip of Pantelleria.'

One of the 325th's pilots, Lt R D Clark, was shot down by an enemy aircraft, but he was subsequently located in a hospital in Sousse, in Tunisia, and returned to duty shortly thereafter.

No enemy aircraft were encountered during the next five missions, but things changed on 15 June when all three squadrons escorted B-26s of the 17th BG to De Pizzo, on Sicily. As the bombers hit the target and set off an immense explosion, Bf 109s engaged the formation. In the running air battle that ensued, two Messerschmitts were shot down. One was claimed by Lt R D Clark, who after his short hospital stay got sweet revenge with his first victory. The other Bf 109 was downed by Lt Harmon E Burns for this third, and last, kill. During the skirmish Flt Off Jim Beck's P-40 was heavily damaged by enemy gunfire, and he was last seen bailing out.

Three days later, in action over Sardinia, Lt Warren Penny destroyed a Bf 109 and Lt Robert Rogers claimed a Fi 156 Storch – he damaged a second Fieseler liaison aircraft in the same engagement. During this sweep the 325th also destroyed a Me 323 and damaged two Ju 52/3ms on the ground, and all pilots returned safely to base.

In addition to the flurry of aerial victories scored while the 325th was flying out of its bases at Montesquieu and Souk el Khemis, another important milestone occurred – the adoption of the group's bright yellow and black checkerboard markings on its P-40s' vertical and horizontal tails. The 325th FG was the first unit in the MTO to be allowed to decorate its aircraft with distinct unit markings.

On 19 June the group moved to a new airfield at Mateur, in Tunisia. Its first mission from here, on 24 June, was a diversionary sweep over Sardinia that saw the 325th claim five more kills at a cost of four of its own. Individual victories were credited to Capt Bunn Hearn, Flt Offs Bill Slattery and Mark Boone, Lt Rayburn Lancaster and future ace Lt Roy Hogg. The latter was also a man of few words, as his encounter report revealed;

'Fired head-on at a Me 109 doing same with cannon. Me 109 burst into a stream of smoke and Lt Boone saw it crash.'

Lost to enemy action were Lt Blifford, whose P-40 was badly shot up and he was forced to crash land in the target area, and Lt Rappman, his aircraft being hit by flak and crashing into the sea. Lts Bollich and Cutter failed to return to base and were listed as MIA.

The next encounter with enemy aircraft occurred on 28 June when the 325th escorted B-26s of the 17th BG once again, this time to Decimomannu. The results of the bombing were undetermined as the formation was attacked by a gaggle of Bf 109s. The enemy pilots



Herschel H 'Herky' Green, who would finish the war as the 325th FG's leading ace with 18 victories, one probable and six damaged to his name (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

Lt 'Herky' Green and his groundcrew pose with their new P-40F-5 41-14512 at Mateur during the late summer of 1943. When Green was assigned this Warhawk it was coded '28', but he soon had this changed to his customary '11' (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

suffered serious losses as they attempted to defend their airfield, with four Bf 109s being shot down and a fifth listed as a probable. In addition to these claims, a sixth Bf 109, two C.202s and a C.200 were damaged during the engagement. The kills were credited to Lt Col Gordon Austin, Capt 'Herky' Green and Flg Offs Clifford Huntington and Archie McKeithen. 'Herky' Green's kill, his third, occurred five miles west of the targeted airfield. He described his victory as follows;

'On an escort mission over Decimomannu airdrome the formation was jumped by enemy fighters before reaching the target. Some minutes after the fight started I encountered a Me 109. He turned sharply to avoid me, and I cut inside his turn and fired a stream of bullets, which he flew through. He straightened out and I continued to fire directly into him. Grey smoke began pouring from the fuselage and he flipped over and dove.'

Green's kill was confirmed by bomber crews that saw the Bf 109 crash. One P-40 and its pilot were lost as Lt Mierizejewski failed to return. He was last seen over the target area.

During the next nine missions no enemy aircraft were encountered, but on 3 July a tragic accident occurred during a strafing mission to Sardinia. Whilst making his pass at the target Lt Keith Bryant pulled up sharply in front of another P-40 and its propeller ripped off the tail section of his Warhawk. Bryant perished in the subsequent crash. The pilot of the second P-40 made it back to Mateur, where he crash-landed.

The Luftwaffe next made an appearance on 7 July during an escort mission to Trapani-Milo airfield on Sicily. Charged with protecting 25 Baltimore IIIA bombers of the Royal Air Force's No 323 Sqn, the 325th engaged 12 Bf 109s and C.202s that attempted to attack the bombers as they approached the target area. Again, the Axis fighters took a beating at the hands of the 'Checkertails', with six aircraft being claimed as destroyed for the loss of one P-40. Single Bf 109s were credited to Lts Hank Brundyge and future ace Walter Walker and Flt Offs Bill Brookbank (his second), Clifford Huntington (his second)



and Bruce Cunningham. The sixth kill, a C.202, was credited to Lt Warren Penny, raising his total to two. Lt Donald Castelberry was shot down in flames by an enemy fighter during the dogfights. Lt Clifford Huntington tried to save Lt Castleberry but failed, stating;

'Flt Off Castelberry and I fell behind the formation as it approached the target. A Me 109 got behind Lt Castelberry, who turned left, with the Me 109 following. I was on Castelberry's left, turning right as I passed him and shot a burst at the Me 109. After a diving turn to the right I came upon the tail of the Me 109, which was still after Castelberry. Shooting again, I saw the canopy come off and smoke pour from the enemy aircraft. The pilot started to spin and I lost sight of him. That both the Me 109 and the P-40 of Lt Castelberry crashed was witnessed by the bombers and confirmed by telephone with Sqn Ldr Hood, RAF, of the Tactical Air Force.'

Lt Walker described his first kill as follows;

'A Me 109 and I met in a head-on attack, but both of us missed, and I turned to meet him. We were both going fast as I approached his tail, but when he did a climbing slow roll he lost most of his speed. I whipped past him and we both dove. Coming out of the dive I blacked out, and when I came to I was in a climbing turn with the Me 109 on my tail. I was turning too tight for his guns to bear, however.

'As I turned inside him he went past me, only to be attacked by another P-40. He avoided this attack by another climbing slow roll, but I was watching him and got on his tail. He dove as I followed, firing at about 200 yards. He pulled up, with me after him, and I fired again as he fell off to the left. We were then at about 2500 ft. He dove, and I expected him to come up beneath me. I tilted up my left wingtip just in time to see him bail out at 200 ft or less and plummet into the sea not ten yards from his aeroplane, which knifed in, making almost no splash.'

Lt Brundyge's victory involved much less dogfighting than Walker's, but the end result was the same;

'The Me 109 came down from the top, about 500 yards behind and to my left. I was alone, so I went after him and caught up with him at about 4000 ft still going straight down. Squeezed a burst into him and he pulled straight up. Followed him up, got off one more burst and we both fell off to the side. He went straight down again and I circled to catch him when he came back up, but when he didn't come back up I looked down and saw him just as he hit the water. The pilot did not leave the aeroplane, nor did it smoke.'

The invasion of Sicily began during the night of 9-10 July 1943, and the 325th FG was kept very busy covering the action. The first of these missions was a sweep over the southern coast on the 9th, pre-invasion. No enemy aircraft were encountered on this mission, but on 10 July it was a different story. While escorting B-25s sent to attack an airfield on Sicily contact was made with the Luftwaffe and three Bf 109s were destroyed for the loss of two P-40s. Single victories went to Lts Joe Bloomer (his third) and Dudley Clark (his second) and Flt Off Otis Prevatt (his second). On the debit side Lt Rogers spun in and crashed on the island and Lt Bill Russell bailed out over the sea and was rescued by an invasion barge.

The second mission of 10 July took off at 1630 hrs, with pilots from the group escorting B-25s of the 321st BG that again targeted airfields



The right side of 'Zack' Taylor's P-40 carried the name *My Gal Sal*. Note the replacement lower portion of the cowling (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

Capt Ralph 'Zack' Taylor's P-40L-1 41-10436 as it appeared after he scored three kills on 20 July 1943 to raise his total to six victories. At this time the fighter bore the names *Duchess of Durham IV* on the left and *My Gal Sal* on the right side of the cowling, but the artwork on the lower cowling and the group's 'checkerboard' on the tail surfaces were still to be applied (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)



on Sicily. More Bf 109s were encountered in the target area, and once again three of them were shot down. This time the victories went to future aces Capt 'Zack' Taylor (his third) and Lts Walter Walker (his second) and 'Spot' Collins (his fourth). The latter pilot's encounter report stated;

'While flying an escort mission with the 321st BG over Trapani-Milo airdrome I destroyed a Me 109. Just as the formation was making a turn to the left, coming from the north, I saw the Me 109 making a dive from out of the sun to attack the bombers. I turned into him and fired into his engine during a head-on pass. The Me 109 rolled

over to the right and went down, flames and white smoke coming from the aeroplane as it descended.'

Two P-40s were also shot down, but both pilots survived. Further action over Sicily on 12 and 13 July added three more victories to the 325th's growing scoreboard. On the 12th Flt Off Mark Boone shot down a Bf 109 for his third, and last, victory, and on the 13th Lt Donald Dove and Flt Off Paul M Hesler Jr each claimed a Messerschmitt. Tactical missions were then flown for the next few days, and no enemy aircraft were encountered during the dive-bombing and strafing attacks undertaken by the group against targets on both Sardinia and Sicily.

On 20 July the 325th FG again headed to Sardinia to dive-bomb several targets on the island, and this time the Luftwaffe was there to greet the group. The action began with a strafing attack on an airfield, where five Bf 109s and two Ju 52/3ms were shot up on the ground along with ten trucks and about 300 German soldiers that were caught in the open. At this point a flight of 12 Bf 109s arrived on the scene and immediately engaged the P-40s, shooting down Flt Off George Dickas. It was a short-lived victory for the mixed force of German and Italian fighters, however, with the hunters quickly becoming the hunted. Capt 'Zack' Taylor led a furious counterattack on the enemy formation, and seven Axis fighters were quickly shot down.

Capt Taylor led the scoring by downing two C.202s and a Bf 109, thus raising his score to six to become the 325th's first ace. Taylor reported; 'While flying south toward Monserrato I saw three enemy aeroplanes dead ahead and one off to the left. I fired directly into one of the 202s. There was a dogfight with several sharp turns. He was finally hit by some of my bursts, and I saw him crash-land in a cloud

of dust in an orchard just north of Monserrato airdrome.

'In a dogfight with several other 202s and some other P-40s, I engaged a 202 and was turning left tightly enough to fire into him when he flipped over to turn right. I let go a long burst that hit him squarely. He went down, crashing on the northwest corner of Monserrato airdrome. A huge burst of flame and smoke indicated complete destruction.

'In a running combat with a Me 109 and three 202s, the Me 109 overran a turn and I fired a long burst at him from completely astern. We were headed east at the time. I saw the flash of flame under my left wing as he crashed.'

The remaining victories were credited to future ace Lt George Novotny (a C.202), Capt Warden (a Bf 109) and Flt Offs Jones (a Bf 109) and Brundyge (a C.202).

On the 22nd the 325th headed to the island of Sardinia at 0805 hrs for an early fighter sweep, and it turned

out to be quite a day for the group. After strafing a number of targets on the island the P-40s ran into a swarm of 25-30 enemy aircraft, the bulk of which were Italian C.202s. In the dogfight that followed no fewer than 17 victories were claimed for the loss of two pilots from the 325th. Two of the kills (both C.202s) were credited to Bob Baseler, and these raised his total to four confirmed victories. Five other pilots from the group scored double kills on this mission, namely Maj Everett Howe, Lt Gilbert Gerken and Flt Offs Archie McKeithen, Al Moon and Ebert Smith. Single victories were credited to Lt Richard Copsey and Flt Offs John Gonda, Otis Prevatt and Bill Slattery. The 17th aircraft destroyed was a Ju 52/3m that had been attacked on the ground during the earlier strafing runs.

The 'Checkertails' resumed their scoring spree on 26 July during another fighter sweep to Sardinia – the group's 100th mission. As the 325th passed over southern Sardinia a mixed flight of ten C.202s and two Bf 109s tried to intercept the P-40s, and they paid heavily for their effort. Maj Baseler became the group's second ace when he shot a C.202 down for his fifth victory. Three other Macchi fighters were downed by Capt Watkins, Lt Whiteside and Flt Off Maret, and the fifth, and final, kill of the day was a Bf 109 claimed by Flt Off Charlie Brown.

Two more victories were added to the 325th's scoreboard on 28 July over Sardinia when Flt Off Bill Slattery destroyed a C.202 for this third, and final, victory, and a second Macchi was claimed by future ace Lt Roy Hogg. This skirmish turned out to be minuscule compared to what



Lt Walter B Walker (in the centre) became an ace in his P-40F-15 41-19896 on 30 July 1943 by downing three enemy aircraft over Sardinia, thus raising his total to five victories (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth)

happened over southern Sardinia two days later. The 317th FS was attacked by 25 to 30 Bf 109s just north of Alghero, and shortly thereafter an additional eight to twelve Messerschmitt fighters and C.202s joined in the attack. Ultimately, this proved to be an ill-fated decision for the Axis pilots, because when the air battle finally ended some 21 Bf 109s had been destroyed at the cost of one P-40 – its pilot, Bob Sederberg, survived as a prisoner of war.

Lt Walter B Walker Jr led the scoring with three kills, raising his total to five to make him the group's third ace. Walker downed his first two Bf 109s within two minutes, but in the process his P-40 sustained some damage and ran out of ammunition. Nevertheless, he engaged a third Bf 109;

'I was flying about 50 ft above the water when the Me 109 turned down and into me. I turned sharply to the left. He tried to pull in too tight, stalled viciously, flipped over and went straight down into the water. I didn't fire a shot at him because I had used up all my ammunition before the attack.'

Three other pilots scored doubles in the action, namely Capt D E Warden, Lt H E Eyerley and Flt Off Clifford Huntington. Future aces Capt Richard Dunkin and Lt Cecil Dean also downed a Bf 109 apiece for their first victories, while future ace Lt George Novotny claimed his second kill in this massive engagement. Capt Dunkin reported;

'The squadron was flying a fighter sweep over northern Sardinia when we were attacked by about 30 Me 109s. In the ensuing fight I was flying on my flight leader's wing when I saw a Me 109 climbing on the tail of a P-40 about 500 ft above me. I turned into the Me 109, shooting from a deflection angle of about 45 degrees. My tracers appeared to hit the aeroplane. When he noticed that I was shooting at him he tightened his turn and nosed down. I turned inside of him and got on his tail, firing a good burst from dead astern. The aeroplane burst into flame and nosed down, then I saw the explosion as he struck the ground.'

Lt George Novotny recalled;

'We were attacked by 12 Me 109s just as we turned south on a fighter sweep down the valley. The fight was about eight minutes old when a Me 109 came down on me from the rear. He passed over me and pulled up in a half roll and waited upside down. At this time I pulled up and fired a long burst into the aeroplane. There was a flash and the aeroplane started to smoke. The pilot bailed out on the left side of his ship and dropped about 2000 ft before he opened his 'chute.'

Lt Dean scored his first victory as he was heading home from the raid;

'While returning from a fighter scramble south of Sassari a Me 109 jumped me and started firing. I had to make a right turn, flying through a barrage set up by the Me 109 – two shells hit my aeroplane. I pulled up and rolled and then pulled down to the left, firing a ten-degree deflection shot at close range at the Me 109. My bullets riddled his fuselage and pieces flew off the aeroplane in all directions. The aeroplane took a dive and headed straight down toward the earth, where it was seen to crash.'

The remaining kills were scored by Capt W R Reed and B Hearn, Lts N C Carroll, R H Mock, G C Staley, R S Sederberg and G C Hamilton and Flt Offs W T Tudor and A D Donovan. It had been a big day for the 'Checkertails', with 21 confirmed victories, but they were to

learn much later that in the heat of battle they had actually under-claimed! In September 1943, following the signature of the armistice with Italy, future group CO Col Chet Sluder learned from Italian pilots that the 325th had engaged a new and inexperienced German unit (possibly III./JG 77) on 30 July and downed between 30 and 35 Bf 109s during the ensuing action. Lt Sederberg, who had been shot down during the clash, later found out that he should have been credited with downing four or five enemy fighters per the testimony of several other 325th FG pilots, instead of just the one he was officially credited with. Unfortunately for him the USAAF never changed the official record. The 325th FG received a Distinguished Unit Citation (DUC) for this action, and the survivors of the German unit were sent home the next day for retraining.

The mission of 2 August cost the 325th FG a potential ace when Flt Off Archie McKeithen suffered a mid-air collision with an Axis seaplane that was marked with red crosses. McKeithen had scored four aerial victories prior to this unfortunate accident. A search mission was flown that day, but no traces of the downed pilot were found.

On 5 August the P-40s of the 325th found and destroyed a target of a totally different type during an escort mission to Sardinia. While returning to base three pilots of the 319th FS saw a U-boat on the surface of the Mediterranean Sea and attacked. Lt William R Elliott made the first pass, the burst from his machine guns causing an explosion in the conning tower. Following Elliott's attack Lts Ritter and Hartley targeted the submarine with some long bursts from their guns, and the stern of the vessel was seen to lift into the air before it went straight down, leaving a large oil slick in its wake. Initially the U-boat was reported as damaged, but the pilots later received credit for the destruction of the vessel.

A mixed gaggle of Bf 109s and C.202s was encountered by the 325th during a fighter sweep over Sardinia on 7 August. Engaged just east of Oristano, two of the enemy fighters were shot down by Capt Joe Bloomer and Flt Off Paul Maret of the 318th FS. With these two kills the group's grand total now reached 128 victories, for the loss of 33 aircraft in combat.

With the battle of Sicily winding down, the attacks on Sardinia increased as that was where most of the Axis airfields that remained operational were located. In what was to become its final month of flying the P-40, the 325th flew numerous missions to Sardinia to help disrupt the Luftwaffe's bombing of Allied seaports in North Africa, and to lessen its ability to launch air assaults against the upcoming landings at Salerno, in Italy. The 325th FG became so heavily involved in this aerial assault against Sardinia that the group gained the nickname of the 'Sardinian Air Force'.

During much of this period the 325th's pilots bombed and strafed many targets throughout Sardinia without any opposition from the Luftwaffe. Finally, on 28 August, the Luftwaffe decided to show its face and partially disrupt the group's attack on industrial sites across the island. Twenty-six Bf 109s attacked, but the P-40 pilots were more than up to the task of defending themselves and duly claimed seven of the Axis fighters shot down – these proved to be the last aerial victories claimed by the 325th FG in the P-40.

Leading the counterattack was Capt John A Watkins, who was later awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) for his actions. The 325th's public relations officer described the mission as follows;



The *Duchess of Durham IV/My Gal Sal* is seen here in its final scheme while assigned to Capt 'Zack' Taylor. After the 325th FG's conversion to P-47 Thunderbolts, this aircraft was transferred to the 324th FG. It soldiered on with the group as Capt Bruce Hunt's '11' (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

'On 28 August 1943, while on a fighter-bomber mission over southwestern Sardinia, Capt Watkins had dropped his bombs on the target when he looked back and saw that a squadron of P-40s was being attacked by approximately 30 Me 109s. He left his flight and turned back to aid the outnumbered squadron. He attacked two Me 109s that were diving on a flight of four P-40s, destroying one and damaging the other so severely that it broke off and went into a glide toward the ground. A few minutes later he saw two Me 109s making a surprise attack on a flight of P-40s. Capt Watkins called a warning to the P-40s, then turned into the enemy aircraft and opened fire. He shot one of them down in flames and severely damaged the second. He then attacked a fifth enemy fighter, firing four bursts into it.'

Another Bf 109 was shot down by Lt 'Spot' Collins, raising his total to five and thereby making him the 325th's fourth ace. Future ace George Novotny also claimed a Messerschmitt for his third victory, reporting;

'We were attacked from the rear by two Me 109s and immediately went into a Lufbery. My leader got on the tail of a Me 109 going straight up and I made a turn to the right, finding two Me 109s slightly below me. I attacked them from a 90-degree approach and closed on the last aeroplane. I saw my tracers hit his engine and fuselage and observed flame and smoke coming out of the aeroplane. Then the aeroplane started spinning and crashed in flames on the coast.'

The remaining three Bf 109s were credited to Lts Henry Brundyge and Daniel Owen and Flt Off John Palmer. Two of the P-40s were damaged in the skirmish but both pilots made it back safely.

During the remainder of August and until its final P-40 mission on 22 September 1943, the 325th continued carrying out bombing and strafing attacks against targets in Sardinia. This final offensive against the island was ordered by Gen Jimmy Doolittle, commander of the Northwest African Strategic Air Force (NASAF). Indeed, he told Lt Col Bob Baseler (now CO of the 325th FG) that Sardinia was the group's prime target, and that only the 325th would be attacking it. Missions continued to be flown against Axis forces until they finally surrendered Sardinia on 22 September.

The P-40 era had now come to a close for the 325th FG, and it was soon withdrawn from combat in order to be re-equipped with Republic P-47 Thunderbolts. While flying Warhawks the 325th had completed 128 missions totalling 3990 sorties, claimed 135 aerial victories and dropped 328,820 lbs of bombs. It had in turn lost 35 pilots in combat.

THUNDERBOLT AND THE FIFTEENTH AIR FORCE

The 325th FG commenced its transition to the P-47 on 22 September 1943. This would be a major change for the unit, as not only would it be receiving a new aircraft, it would also be using the big Republic fighter to perform missions that were entirely different to those the group had previously flown with the P-40.

On this date Mateur airfield received a number of important visitors in the form of civilian technical representatives from Republic. With their arrival pilots and groundcrew commenced the intensive training that would be needed to allow the 325th to operate the P-47s effectively. The first appearance of the group's new fighter was on 11 October 1943 when Lt Col Bob Baseler picked up a P-47 from the aircraft assembly area at Bizerte, in Tunisia, and flew it to Mateur. Shortly thereafter the rainy season hit the training area and the 325th moved to Soliman, also in Tunisia, on 4 November, where it resumed training from a better facility that boasted paved runways.

Armed with a new aircraft that was far superior to the P-40, the 325th FG was now given a major change of assignment, to the newly formed Fifteenth Air Force. During this training period the group provided a fighter escort for the transport aircraft that was carrying President Franklin D Roosevelt and his party to the Tehran Conference. This assignment was proof positive that the 325th's outstanding record in the bomber escort role had been recognised by senior staff officers in the USAAF.

In order to assist with the group's P-47 training, Wing Headquarters thought it would be beneficial to bring in some experienced Thunderbolt pilots from the Eighth Air Force to assist – Lewis W 'Bill' Chick, Bill Madole and Archie Hill duly arrived at Soliman on 3 December. Probably the most experienced of the three was Maj Bill Chick, who had flown Spitfire Vs and the Thunderbolt

Lt Col Lewis W Chick, CO of the 317th FS, poses in his P-47D 42-76021 *Rocky* shortly after becoming an ace on 14 February 1944. Chick closed out his tour of duty with a total of six aerial victories to his name (Lewis W Chick via Tom Ivie)



as a member of the 4th FG before being transferred to VIII Fighter Command's Combat Operations Section. A man of action, Chick was unhappy in this staff position and soon transferred to the 355th FG so that he could see further combat in P-47 missions. From here he joined the 325th FG.

Maj Chick, who would soon become the CO of the 317th FS and an ace with the 325th, was an outspoken character who had expressed his dissatisfaction with the Eighth Air Force's fighter tactics. Upon joining the group in Tunisia he was greatly cheered by Gen Doolittle's support for the implementation of new fighter tactics over Italy. Chick noted in a letter to the author;

'I was sent to Italy, where Gen Doolittle said to stay with the bombers until enemy fighters are sighted and then go after them. He wanted us to destroy the enemy fighters whenever we saw them so that we wouldn't have to engage them again tomorrow.'

Chick loved the P-47 as a combat aircraft, and he explained why – in a typically colourful way – in a comparison between the Mustang and the Thunderbolt in his letter of 17 June 1975;

'The Mustang was a lady, and as long as you treated her like a lady she was fine, but if you abused her she would let you down. The "Jug" was an old whore. The more you kicked her around, the more she loved you. She used up all of your money [fuel] in a hurry, but she would still give you a hell of a ride even if the cops [enemy aircraft] were knocking at the door. Not the kind of gal that you wanted to take home and introduce to your mother, but always fascinating and fast.'

The groundcrew began their move to Italy, and the new base at Foggia Main, between 1 and 3 December, with the pilots following them on the 9th. Although the group was still short of its complete complement of maintainers, it began P-47 operations from Italy on 14 December 1943 with an escort mission to Greece. It turned out to be a 'milk run', as did the next five, but on mission four two of the 'Checkertail Clan's' pilots did get a chance to fire their guns at targets on the ground. 'Spot' Collins strafed and destroyed a Ju 52/3m on the airfield at Ancona and Maj Chick strafed a 200 ft vessel moored at Rozzeto di Abrizi, receiving a hail of flak in return.

The mission scheduled for Christmas Day ended tragically when bad weather swept in and three of the 325th's pilots were killed when they flew into a mountain in overcast conditions.

By 30 December Foggia Main had become so overcrowded that the 325th was transferred to a nearby airfield referred to as Foggia 1. In spite of the move, the group still flew a mission that day – withdrawal support for B-17s bombing Verona. A number of Bf 109s were encountered during the operation and three of them were shot down. Two of the kills were claimed by Flt Off Richard Catlin, and the third fighter was downed by Lt Clarence Greene of the 319th FS.

The New Year would see the 325th FG increasingly involved in the Fifteenth Air Force's strategic plan to isolate the battle for Italy from Germany. The group's primary role was to escort the heavy bombers to targets throughout Italy, Austria and some of the Balkan countries. It would also fly fighter sweeps against the Luftwaffe's fighter forces in an attempt to draw them into combat, thereby reducing the number of enemy aircraft available to intercept Allied bombers.



Between 4 and 10 January the 325th flew unopposed escort missions to targets in Italy, Austria and Bulgaria. The only loss during this period was Lt Miller, who failed to return from the 10 January mission in unknown circumstances.

The absence of enemy aircraft ended on the mission of 13 January when the 325th provided withdrawal support for bombers that had attacked German airfields in the Rome area. The group intercepted a flight of approximately 25 Bf 109s over the target area and shot down three of them. One of the kills was scored by the newly promoted Capt 'Spot' Collins (his seventh victory), while the other two were claimed by Maj James Toner and Lt John M Forrest. The P-47 of Lt Fallons was damaged in the melee but he returned safely to base.

The next five missions were again uneventful, but on the second mission of 19 January the 325th ran into some Bf 109s in the Rome area and two of them went down under the guns of future aces Maj Chick and Flt Off Edsel Paulk. The encounter took place just after the B-17s had bombed Contocello airfield, the two enemy fighters being spotted attempting to attack the Fortresses from the rear. Maj Chick, who led his section after them, initially attacked the leader of the pair, hitting him with a burst before losing both fighters momentarily at 10,000 ft. Chick subsequently reported;

'I pulled up from my dive and fired at the wingman from about 50 yards. The shots were telling, as he burst into flames and started down. I followed him down from about 8000 ft to 4000 ft and watched him crash.'

Edsel Paulk, who destroyed the other Bf 109, noted;

'There were four of us and two of them, so it was a question as to who would get to them first. We all shot at them. After Maj Chick got the first one, the second one tried to get away, but I was able to make a quick turn and keep on his tail until I saw the aeroplane smoking and the pilot bail out.'

The next encounter with the Luftwaffe took place on 21 January during a fighter sweep over the Florence area, and this time the foes were Fw 190s. The group engaged the German fighters about 20 miles southeast of Florence and claimed four Focke-Wulfs destroyed. They were credited

P-47D *Little Sir Echo* was the mount of Lt Edsel Paulk of the 317th FS. He served in the 317th FS from June 1943 through to July 1944, and scored at least one of his five victories in this P-47. Paulk's encounter reports did not note if he was flying this aircraft when he claimed his first four kills (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth)

Capt Raymond Hartley served with the 319th FS from December 1943 through to August 1944, commanding the squadron from March to June 1944. He scored two victories and one damaged with the 'Checkertails', and later became an ace by scoring three more kills as a member of the 353rd FG (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth)



Lt Robert M Barkey served in the 319th FS from December 1943 through to mid-June 1944, scoring six victories during his tour of duty. Five of his kills were claimed in the P-47, while his final victory, on 6 June 1944, was scored in his P-51B-15 43-24857 *Dorothy-II* (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth)



to Capt Raymond Hartley Jr and Lts Harry Carroll, William Elliott and Fielder Smith. Future ace Capt Hartley gave a long and detailed report of his trials and tribulations before scoring his first victory;

'We were at 15,000 ft about six minutes south of Florence when, at 1225 hrs, Lt Elliott called out "bogies at 11 o'clock". Maj Tirk, leading the squadron, instructed Lt Elliott to go after them – I led my flight down with Elliott's. The aeroplanes were FW 190s, painted dark blue on top and light blue underneath. There were five or six flying south in a line abreast formation at about 10,000 ft, and we peeled off after them when they were almost directly beneath us. Lt Elliott's flight went after the left-hand three and I led my flight after the right-hand two. I selected the one on the left as my target.

'Elliott's flight, being ahead of us, opened fire, and the FW 190s started split-essing. I saw one roll over and up trailing smoke and fire, and moments later a 'chute opened. My FW did a split-s and then a half roll, and I was able to follow him through both manoeuvres despite the fact that my fighter was still carrying its wing tanks. I finally released my wing tanks as we pulled out of a dive at 2000 ft. I then forgot to switch to my main tank, and momentarily lost speed when the engine was briefly starved of fuel. Another P-47 now got out in front of me in pursuit of the FW.

'We chased the enemy fighter down to the deck and quite a way south. The lead P-47 fired several bursts and I thought I observed several explosions along the wing of the FW, although I was well behind and it was hazy. Then the lead P-47 broke off the chase, banking away to the left despite me calling him to keep going. I continued the chase.

Although the FW pilot was weaving as if to look behind him, I apparently took my opponent by surprise when I fired from close range. I scored hits along the left wing and bottom of the fuselage. The FW started a long climbing turn to the right, and I adjusted my lead and observed hits on top of the fuselage. The FW then rolled slowly onto its back and a large sheet of flame came out of its belly at the wing root. The pilot then split-essed into the ground from about 100 ft. This was between 1230 and 1235 hrs. Just before the crash I had to pull back on my throttle to keep from overrunning the FW.'

This mission was followed up by another fighter sweep on 22 January, this time to Rome and the invasion area around Anzio. The 325th dodged flak and groundfire throughout the operation, and it also encountered 12-15 Bf 109s south of Rome – five of these aircraft were shot down. Capt 'Spot' Collins flamed two of them for his seventh and eighth victories, while future ace Lt Robert Barkey claimed his first victory. He reported;

'Two of us were over Guidonia airdrome, near Rome, when we spotted about 12 Me 109s below us, so we dove on them. We were less than 30 ft from the ground and travelling at about 400 mph. When I was about 50 ft behind a Me 109 I got a good burst into his tail. I could see pieces fly off, he rolled over and crashed.'

The remaining two kills were credited to Maj Chick and Lt Elliott. Sadly, two of the 325th's pilots were reported missing following this mission.

Additional victories were scored on 23 and 27 January by Lts Steacy Rogers and George Hamilton, but for the most part the ten missions from 23 through to 29 January were uneventful. This would all change on the 30th, however.

Throughout the previous several weeks USAAF intelligence had been closely listening in on Luftwaffe radio traffic. From this clandestine eavesdropping it had been determined that the Germans scrambled their fighters about 15 minutes before the USAAF heavy bombers arrived over their targets. Armed with this knowledge, Fifteenth Air Force mission planners decided to despatch 61 P-47s (one of which aborted) from the 325th on a fighter sweep against five enemy airfields in the Villaorba and Udine areas. The 'Checkertail Clan' was instructed to attack enemy aircraft as they were taking off and forming up to meet the oncoming bomber formations.

The 325th departed at 0945 hrs and headed across the Adriatic Sea at a height of just 50 ft in order to escape German radar. The fighters then climbed to altitude over the Gulf of Venice. Reaching Villaorba at 1145 hrs and stacked from 15,000 ft up to 19,000 ft, the group observed 60 German fighters scrambling into the sky. In addition to these fighters, a number of other types of Axis aircraft were

A smiling Capt 'Herky' Green after returning to base on 30 January 1944. Flying Bunn Hearn's Thunderbolt *The Star of Altoona* on that date instead of his assigned P-47 '11', Capt Green destroyed six enemy aircraft to become the 'Checkertail Clan's' first 'ace-in-a-day' (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)





Capt Bunn Hearn poses in the cockpit of his P-47 *The Star of Altoona*, the serial of which remains unknown. The two swastikas represent victories Hearn scored while flying the P-40 (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

Lt Cecil Dean's P-47D-6 42-74957 was adorned with one of the most aggressive bits of nose art seen on a fighter of the 317th FS – a black panther with a Bf 109 in its mouth. Dean scored three of his six kills in P-47s (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth)



fleeing the airfields so as to avoid the upcoming bombing. The stage was now set and the massacre of enemy aircraft was about to begin. When it was all over no fewer than 37 Axis aircraft had fallen to the guns of the 325th, with a further seven claimed as probables, against two losses. 'A' Flight of the 317th claimed 15 of the confirmed kills, with Capt 'Herky' Green showing the way by shooting down four

Ju 52/3ms, a C.202 and a Do 217. His mission report read as follows;

'Immediately upon reaching the target area we began to encounter isolated enemy aeroplanes, and several fights started. I peeled off with a section of four and went down to attack a bunch of transports we could see approaching at an altitude of about 1000 ft. There were 11 Ju 52/3ms and they were strung out in a loose in-trail formation. We came out of the sun at high speed and went right down the line. I got four on one pass, and three other pilots, Lt Novotny and Flt Offs Dean and Paulk, destroyed the remaining seven.'

Shortly afterwards Capt Green downed his fifth victim – a C.202 – at treetop level. After destroying the Macchi he found himself alone, so he started a climbing turn to the south in the direction of home. As he was crossing the coastline at 15,000 ft he saw a Do 217 at about 5000 ft, so he dived after the bomber and quickly set it on fire with several bursts. Green then watched as the aircraft exploded in flames when it hit the ground – victory number six! With these six kills Capt Green tied with Capt 'Spot' Collins (who also scored a victory on this mission) as the 325th FG's leading ace with nine victories. Collins reported;

'I was circling at 11,000 ft, heading north over a railway line ten miles east of Villaorba airdrome, when I observed a Me 109 attacking two P-47s at about 3000 ft below me. I rolled over and dove straight toward the Me 109 and gave it a burst from the rear and above, but saw no hits.

The enemy aeroplane saw me, then turned to the right and then levelled out, evidently trying to outrun me. I closed to firing range and continued firing until I had almost overrun him. I broke off, peeled up and looked back. Flames were coming from the Me 109's fuselage, and the aeroplane was obviously out of control. It spiralled in from about 6000 ft and crashed.'

Lt George Novotny downed two of the Ju 52/3ms, followed by an Hs 126, to raise his total to six and thus become the 'Clan's' newest ace. Future ace Flt Off Cecil Dean nailed three Ju 52/3ms, raising his



Lt George Novotny poses in front of an unidentified P-47D of the 317th FS. Novotny was assigned Thunderbolt 42-75971 *Ruthless Ruthie/Lady Janie VI*, and he claimed five of his eight victories in P-47s. He served in the 317th FS from June 1943 through to June 1944 (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

score to four. Not to be outdone, fellow future ace Flt Off Edsel Paulk shot down a Bf 109 and two Ju 52/3ms, which also raised his total to four.

Maj Chick's flight of four 317th FS Thunderbolts, meanwhile, was attacked head on by six Bf 109s. In the ensuing combat Chick scored two kills within ten minutes when he shot a pair of enemy fighters off the tail of a lone P-47, thus raising his score to four kills. Two other future aces also claimed victories in this engagement, Lt Roy Hogg downing a Fw 190 as his fourth kill and Lt Eugene Emmons being credited with his first two successes (a Bf 109 and a C.202). Lt Hogg reported;

'I saw a MC 202 pressing an attack against a P-47 [Lt P E Suehle] in a fight slightly below me. I immediately turned into the Macchi, fired a short burst and saw the enemy aircraft blow up in mid-air, hit the ground and burn.'

A few minutes later Lt Col Bob Baseler downed a Ju 88 for his sixth, and final, victory. He said in his encounter report;

'Saw a Ju 88 being attacked by four P-47s. The Ju 88 turned into the attackers and they overshot. I slowed up, slid in behind him and gave him two short bursts. He pulled straight up, stalled, flame belched forth from both engines and he crashed and burned on the west side of the town of Palmaniva, Italy.'

The remaining kills were claimed by Lts Neil Carroll, James Jones, Noel Kitchen and Phillip Whiteside, with each pilot being credited with two apiece. Single kills were awarded to Lts John Brower, J C Dorety, Gerald Edwards, Walter Dahl, Donald Kerns and P E Suehle.



Lt Roy Hogg looks quite satisfied after scoring two kills on the mission of 30 January 1944, raising his total to four. He became an ace nearly six months later when he downed two Fw 190s on 6 June 1944 (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

Lt Roy Hogg's assigned P-47D 42-75990, showing the 318th FS's swept back cowling marking and national insignia added to the wheel covers (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)





P-47D-10 42-75008 *BIG STUD* was probably the best known of the various fighters flown by Lt Col Robert Baseler during his long tenure as CO of the 325th FG – he led the group from 5 April 1943 to 1 April 1944. Baseler scored his sixth, and final, victory in this Thunderbolt on 30 January 1944 (*Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth*)

For his leadership and aggressiveness in planning and leading this record-breaking assault on the Axis air forces in Italy, Lt Col Baseler was immediately awarded the Silver Star after the group returned home. The 325th also received its second DUC for this daring mission.

The assault on Axis aircraft continued the next day during an escort mission to Udine, in Italy. Whilst over the target area the group encountered a mixed bag of enemy aircraft. The first of these was a group of six Fw 190s that attempted to attack the B-17s being escorted by the 325th. The German pilots broke off their interception and fled when the P-47s turned into them. Four Bf 109s then tried to engage the bombers, but they too were driven off. This time two enemy aircraft were shot down by Lts William Rynne and Ferdinand Suehle, the former noting in his encounter report;

‘I dove through flak after a Me 109. The enemy aeroplane split-essed and I followed, firing as I closed in. I then saw the canopy open and the pilot bail out. The aeroplane spun in and crashed. Other pilots saw a parachute in the combat area.’

Moments later five SM.82 transports were seen flying far below, and future aces Lts Richard Dunkin, Cullen Hoffman and William Rynne pulled in behind them on the deck and quickly shot down three of the Savoia-Marchetti tri-motors.

The month of February 1944 got off to a slow and sad start for the ‘Checkertail Clan’, as the first six missions were flown without any encounters with enemy fighters. The unit suffered a fatality, however, when Lt Phillip Whiteside apparently became disorientated in a heavy overcast and spun into the ground.

The mission of 14 February at last saw the heavy bombers – targeting Verona’s railway marshalling yards – engaged by Axis fighter units once again. After rendezvousing with the bombers, 47 Thunderbolts had shepherded the ‘heavies’ to within ten miles of the target when they were challenged by a mixed force of 25 Bf 109s and five C.202s. Thirty-two of the P-47s peeled off and went after the enemy aeroplanes, and in the 30-minute dogfight that ensued seven Axis fighters were shot down and three more were claimed as probables. Future ace Lt Eugene Emmons

brought down both a Bf 109 and a C.202 for his third and fourth kills and Maj Bill Chick flamed a Messerschmitt for his fifth victory – the ‘Clan’ had another new ace. His wingman, Lt Rynne, downed the wingman of Maj Chick’s kill shortly thereafter for his third victory. The report stated;

‘Maj Chick, with Lt Rynne on his wing, chased a lone Me 109 about 50 miles, then returned to the combat and saw two Me 109s and pursued them to the southeast through a long dive from 30,000 ft to 13,000 ft, steadily closing in on them. About 15 miles northwest of Ferrara, Chick and Rynne each chose a target and fired at their respective Me 109s. Maj Chick shot one of them down in flames and Lt Rynne observed it.’

Moments later Lt Rynne knocked the other Bf 109 out of the sky and Maj Chick confirmed it. In other actions Lts Mock, Malloy and Clark each claimed a Bf 109 destroyed to round out the day’s score. Weather then became the enemy and only five more missions were flown during the remainder of February, with Lt Soper failing to return from the 22 February mission, cause unknown. Another pilot, Lt Clifford White, was killed three days later when his engine failed on takeoff and he crashed into Lake Lesina.

The first mission of March 1944 turned out to be a milk run when the 325th escorted B-17s attacking German troop concentrations in the Anzio beachhead area. However, on the next mission, flown on 3 March, the Luftwaffe was up in force, and it was an experienced gaggle of German fighters that tangled with the ‘Checkertail Clan’ that day. The group was escorting B-24s attacking airfields in the Rome area when the bombers were hit over the target from both sides and from the rear by 20 Bf 109s and 12 Fw 190s in a well executed attack. The 325th FG quickly swung into action, and in a swirling series of dogfights the ‘Clan’ managed to claim six fighters destroyed, two probables and six damaged, but at a cost of four pilots shot down.



Lt Col Lewis W ‘Bill’ Chick’s P-47D 42-76021 was named *Rocky*, and he scored at least two of his six kills in this Thunderbolt. Chick served as commanding officer of the 317th FS from January to March 1944 (Lewis W Chick via Tom Ivie)

P-47D 42-75929 *Ginger* was assigned to Capt William A Rynne of the 317th FS, and he put it to good use scoring five victories and one probable with it. In March 1944 he transferred to the 319th FS, serving as its CO from 20 to 28 March, when he was shot down. Rynne has been mistakenly reported as having been killed in action in several documents, but he survived the war after spending several months as a PoW (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)





'Herky' Green's famous P-47D '11', the serial number of which remains unknown, is seen here at Lesina shortly after he scored his 13th victory on 7 April 1944. Maj Green, CO of the 317th FS from 25 March to 23 September, claimed three of his ten P-47 kills in this aircraft (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

Future ace Lt Richard Deakins was the top scorer for the day with a Bf 109 and a Fw 190 destroyed. Newly promoted Lt Col Bill Chick claimed his sixth, and final, victory of his tour with the 317th FS by downing a Bf 109. He noted;

'I spotted a lone Me 109 at about 16,000 ft flying towards Rome. I dived on the Me 109 and chased him down to 8000 ft, at which point I fired a few bursts from directly behind the enemy aircraft. The Me 109 caught on fire as it entered a cloud, and when the aeroplane came out on the far side of the cloud the pilot was seen to bail out. The remainder of my flight confirmed the victory.'

Two other Bf 109s were shot down by Flt Off Gerald Storts and Lt Winston Vaught, while the final kill of the day was a Fw 190 destroyed by Lt S E Brown. Lts Walker, Been, Ridgeway and Eastman failed to return to base, however.

The fierce fighting on the ground continued as Allied forces tried to break out from the Anzio beachhead. Their efforts were supported from the air by continual attacks on German positions, supply lines and airfields. As expected, Axis fighter units were up in strength in an attempt to meet the threat of Allied air power. The 'Checkertail Clan' experienced this for themselves on the escort mission of 11 March. The target was the Padua railway marshalling yards, and the bombers were met by a force of 65 enemy aircraft in the target area.

Dogfighting broke out when the lead and centre sections of the bomber formation were jumped by 15 Bf 109s. Simultaneously, the straggling rear section was also engaged by a gaggle of 50 enemy aeroplanes. The 325th saw the attacks as they materialised and immediately bounced the German formations. A series of individual encounters then took place in the skies over Padua, and when they were all over 'Clan' pilots claimed a total of ten enemy aircraft destroyed, four as probables and one damaged, at the cost of three of their own. Maj 'Herky' Green reported;

'My wingman and I dove into a concentration of about 40 enemy aircraft. During the scramble I was able to get behind a Me 109, and at first my gunfire did not have any effect as I was being bounced around by the prop wash from the enemy aeroplane. Later, while still in a dive, I hit the Me 109 – I observed explosions in and around the cockpit. Then the Me 109 caught fire and went out of control.'



Green's tenth kill was confirmed by Lt Hogg.

Capt William Rynne chipped in by destroying two Bf 109s for his fourth and fifth kills, thus becoming the 'Clan's' newest ace. The remaining kills were credited to Lts Frank Butler, Robert Clark, Robert Barkey, Robert Chesney, James Jones, Lynn Kern and William Carswell. All of the downed enemy aircraft were Bf 109s except for Carswell's, which was a C.202. The 'Clan's' three losses were especially tragic as Lt James Jones was accidentally shot down and killed by one of his fellow pilots, while Lt Col Anthony Tirk Jr, CO of the 319th FS, was lost after he led his flight of four P-47s in an attempt to break up the attack by 50 enemy aircraft on the rear bomber formation. Tirk's flight succeeded in disrupting the Axis fighters, but his P-47 was shot up in the process and he bailed out. Tirk's parachute caught fire as he jumped from his blazing fighter and he fell to his death. The final casualty of the day was Flt Off Knox, who was also shot down during the aerial battle.

The next three missions – two fighter sweeps and a bomber escort – were uneventful as the Axis air forces were nowhere in sight. The mission of 18 March (an escort fighter sweep to the Villaorba/Udine area) did, however, stir up the Luftwaffe. Some 30 enemy fighters attacked the bomber formation, and without hesitation the 325th engaged them in what was described in the mission summary 'as a turning fight of chiefly deflection shots and at a higher altitude than usual'. The deflection shooting was apparently quite good, as nine enemy aircraft (seven Bf 109s and two C.205s) fell to the guns of the 325th's P-47s. Double ace Maj 'Herky' Green flamed a Bf 109 for his 11th kill, while Lt George Novotny destroyed another Messerschmitt for his seventh victory. Maj Green's encounter report stated;

After Lt George Novotny's departure from the 317th FS his P-47D 42-75971 *Ruthless Ruthie/Lady Janie VI* was reassigned to future ace Lt John Simmons. These individuals are, from left to right, John Kerr, Pete Vitale, John Simmons, J Bramer and Ira Grandel (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)



P-47D *Shimmy II* was flown by Lt Col Chester 'Chet' Sluder, CO of the 325th FG from 1 April 1944 until 11 September 1944. Sluder scored the first of his two kills in this aircraft (Col Chester Sluder via Tom Ivie)

A close up of the personal markings on Capt William Rynne's P-47D 42-??877 *Ginger* at Lesina, in Italy, during March 1944 (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)



'After about ten minutes of fighter scrambles I observed a Me 109F on my left making a pass at a P-47. I broke left into the Me 109 and he pushed over and headed for the deck. I saw the Me 109 under me and did a double reverse and ended up on his tail. I fired while in a dive, and observed flashes all over its wings and fuselage. As I pulled up the enemy aeroplane was totally out of control and totally enveloped in flames.'

Future ace Robert Barkey downed a Me 109 for his third victory, and the remaining kills were credited to Lts Noel Kitchen, Frank Walker, Lynn Kern, Charles House, Robert Chesney and Harold Clinge. Two P-47s and their pilots, Lts Daniel Davis and Walter Hallett, were lost during the swirling dogfight.

After three uneventful missions flown on the 19th, 22nd and 25th, the 325th FG headed to Verona on 28 March to provide escort for B-17s attacking the city's railway marshalling yards. Near Ferrara the 'Clan' encountered, and engaged, a formation of 40 Bf 109s, and in a 15-minute duel seven of the enemy fighters were destroyed at a cost of three P-47s. Lt Col Chet Sluder and Lts Joseph Folkes and A O Jones each shot down a Bf 109, but the most unusual claim of the day was when Lt John Booth of the 319th FS destroyed four Messerschmitts in a matter of seconds. The event was reported by HQ 325th FG as follows;

'Lt John R Booth set two Me 109s afire and was in the act of turning into more when his wing tip collided with the right wing of a Me 109. The enemy aeroplane's wing was torn off and it twisted away, only to crash into another Me 109 and both were destroyed. Lt Booth had to crash-land his P-47 when he returned to base due to the mid-air collision, but he emerged safely. When his combat film was developed, it was discovered that the two Me 109s he had fired on before the collision were destroyed, thus giving Lt Booth the record of five seconds of combat and four Me 109s destroyed.'

These victories were costly though, as the 319th FS lost its CO, Capt William Rynne, and Lts A O Jones and Hudson.

The last days of March saw the 325th FG move to its new base at Lesina, which was the most forward location of all of the Fifteenth Air Force bases in Italy. The group's first mission from its new base was flown on 29 March, when bombers were escorted to Steyr, in Austria. As the formation approached the target three enemy aircraft were sighted



making passes at the bombers. It was a futile effort on their part as none of the German fighters survived after their attempt to disrupt the mission. The aeroplanes destroyed by the group, which were described in the mission summary as 'FW 290s', were almost certainly standard Fw 190s or Bf 109s, as the Fw 190D long-nose did not reach frontline units until late 1944. Whatever the fighters were, they were sent crashing to earth by Maj 'Herky' Green (his 12th kill) and Lts Frank Butler and John Forrest. Maj Green described his kill as follows;

'While I was covering some straggling bombers I observed a FW 290 below me closing on one of the bombers. I rolled over and came down close behind the enemy aircraft. I gave the FW 290 a burst of fire and saw hits along the fuselage and at the wing roots. At this time black and white smoke began pouring out of the enemy aeroplane. Because of my low altitude I had to pull up, and did not see it crash.'

Lt Penny, however, witnessed Maj Green's attack, and saw the enemy aeroplane trailing smoke and then crashing to earth.

On the final mission of March 1944 Lt George Hamilton destroyed a C.205 over Sofia, Bulgaria.

Lt Col Bob Baseler turned over command of the 325th FG to Lt Col Chester L 'Chet' Sluder on 1 April 1944 and then headed to his new assignment in the 306th Fighter Wing Headquarters. Combat resumed on 2 April with an escort for bombers returning to Steyr, and resulted in three more victories for the 325th FG. Two of the kills were scored by future aces Lts Richard Dunkin and Cullen Hoffman, and a third Bf 109 was shot down by Lt Richard Mock. It was the second victory for Dunkin and Hoffman, and Mock raised his total to three. No P-47s were lost in this skirmish with a gaggle of 20 Bf 109s.

On 6 April the 'Checkertail Clan' headed to an airfield near

An early photograph of Lt Eugene Emmons' P-47D 42-75737 *Hun Hunter*. At this time the fighter is devoid of any victory markings or the group's distinctive 'checkertail', but that would change in short order. Emmons scored his first two kills on 30 January 1944 and became an ace on 6 April that same year. His final count was nine destroyed and one damaged – at least four of these kills were scored in this aircraft (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

Unknown, Lt Cullen Hoffman and Sgt Buford Pasley pose with their P-47D '39' after Hoffman's third kill on 6 April 1944. He claimed at least three of his victories in this aircraft (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth)





Lt Cullen Hoffman chose a bright red lightning bolt as the personal marking for his P-47D (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth)

Zagreb, in Yugoslavia, as escorts for a mixed force of B-17s and B-24s. They were met by 40 Bf 109s, C.202s and C.205s about 60 miles southwest of the target. The 325th broke up the Axis fighter formation and commenced an aerial battle that lasted more than 30 minutes. Predictably, the results came out entirely in the 'Clan's' favour, with ten enemy aircraft being shot down, again for no losses. During the course of the dogfight Lt Novotny downed a C.205 for his eighth, and final, victory, and

Lt Eugene Emmons flamed a Bf 109 for his fifth kill, thus becoming the 325th's newest ace. Future ace Cullen Hoffman also downed a Messerschmitt to raise his total to three. Lt Jim Oxner was the high scorer during the far-ranging clash, as he destroyed two C.205s. Lts Hamilton, Dorety, Storts, Mock and Penny disposed of the remaining five enemy aircraft downed that day.

Several pilots were decorated for their part in rebuffing the Axis attack. Two of the pilots receiving DFCs for their courage and skill in breaking up the attack were Lts Warren Penny and James Dorety of the 317th FS. Penny's citation said in part;

'Realising the imminent danger, and with complete disregard for overwhelming odds, Lt Penny attacked the hostile formation and in the ensuing battle destroyed one enemy fighter. Returning to his formation, he assisted in beating off persistent attacks, enabling the bombers to complete a highly successful bomb run and return to base without loss.'

The following day the 325th FG took off for a special fighter sweep of the Udine area but found the Axis air forces conspicuous by their absence. During the 30-minute sweep of the area only one enemy aeroplane was spotted in the air, and Maj Green made quick work of it. He was about 20 miles east of Venice when he saw a Bf 110 and dived to attack it. Green later noted in his encounter report;

'I came in close behind the enemy aeroplane, and after firing a few bursts its left engine exploded and the aeroplane started to spin. I then pulled up and around to get into position for another firing pass, and noted that even though the fuselage was burning the pilot had righted his aeroplane. I gave the Me 110 another burst, and a few seconds later the enemy aeroplane crashed and cart-wheeled in a ball of flames.'

With victory number 13 in the bag 'Herky' Green was now the top scoring active pilot in the MTO.

Having a break from operations between 8-11 April, the group returned to the fray on the 12th when it provided withdrawal support for B-24s attacking an aircraft factory in Wiener Neustadt. Just after rendezvousing with the bombers in the target area a large gaggle of 57 enemy aircraft were encountered. Six Bf 109s were shot down and another was claimed as a probable, Lt Edsel Paulk flaming one for his fifth victory – another ace was added to the 325th's growing list. Future ace Lt Richard Dunkin

also downed a Bf 109 to raise his total to four, his success on this mission earning him a DFC. Dunkin's leadership was particularly praised, as he had engaged a considerably larger formation and shot down its leader. This in turn caused the enemy fighters to break off their attack on the bombers.

The remaining kills were credited to another future ace, Capt Raymond Hartley Jr (his second kill) and Lts G W Gerken, J R Strain and R Malloy. The 325th almost lost future ace Lt Harry Parker when an overzealous P-38 pilot shot up his P-47, forcing him to bail out. Parker was rescued and returned to base.

The following day (13th) the 325th escorted B-24s when they targeted Budapest airfield. The group discovered a number of enemy aircraft in the target area and immediately engaged them. They were a mixed bag of German and Italian aircraft, and some of them represented new adversaries for the 'Clan'. Lt Eugene Emmons, for example, downed a Reggiane Re.2001 for his sixth kill. Future ace Richard Deakins sent a Bf 109 down in flames for his third success, while Lts A E Aho and J L Brower each destroyed a Me 410. The final victory, a Bf 109, was claimed by Lt R Garcia. Unfortunately, the 325th did not leave the encounter unscathed as Lts Richard Malloy and Richard Mock were lost in this action.

The missions of 15 and 16 April saw no enemy action, but the 'Clan' lost two of its own on the latter date apparently to engine problems. The first to go down was Flt Off J W Barrett, who was forced to ditch into the sea. Later in the flight Lt J R Booth, who had scored four kills in a matter of seconds on 28 March, also ditched in the sea. Both pilots were seen floating in their Mae Wests, but neither was ever recovered and both were entered into the MIA list.

Matters improved on 17 April when the 325th escorted B-24s attacking targets in Belgrade and Sofia, in Yugoslavia. The mission assignment had been to Belgrade, but there was a mix up at the rendezvous point and one squadron continued on to the Yugoslavian capital while the other two units headed to Sofia with the 'wrong' B-24s. The latter group subsequently engaged eight Bf 109s and shot four of them down in flames during a brief action. Ace Eugene Emmons accounted for two of the fighters, raising his score to eight, while Flt Off P J Kastner and Lt Gerald B Edwards destroyed the remaining two Messerschmitts. Lt H C Wolfe claimed a fifth Bf 109 as a probable, and no P-47s were lost or damaged in the skirmish. Lt Edwards' actions in this engagement earned him a DFC, the citation accompanying the medal noting that;

'Near the target Lt Edwards saw eight enemy fighters preparing to attack the bombers. Reacting immediately, he dove after the hostile aircraft and through his aggressiveness and combat proficiency destroyed one enemy fighter and aided in the dispersal of the others.'



Lt Edsel Paulk claimed his fifth kill on 12 April 1944 and posed with his groundcrew for a photograph on their P-47D *Little Sir Echo* to mark the occasion (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth)



The scoreboard on Lt Eugene Emmons' P-47D 42-75737 reflects his new total after his double victory on 17 April 1944 (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

Action continued on 18 April during a fighter sweep to the Udine area, where the group found a mixed bag of 11 Bf 109s and Fw 190s. Two of the latter and one Messerschmitt went down under the gunfire of Lts Paul Dowd, Steacy Rogers and Sam Brown, but this time at a cost, as Lt John Gonda was listed as MIA.

During the remainder of April, except for the mission on the 25th, the Axis air forces were nowhere to be seen. On 25 April the 'Clan' escorted B-24s whose target was an aircraft factory in the Italian city of Turin. This time enemy aeroplanes were spotted twice during the course of the mission. The first encounter was with a formation of 16-20 Bf 109s and C.202s, but as 24 P-47s turned to meet their attack, the enemy fighters broke away and fled rather than face the oncoming Thunderbolts. The remaining 17 P-47s continued with the bombers, and over the target a covey of seven Fiat G.55s tried to attack. Pilots of the 318th FS blunted their attempt, however, and future ace Benjamin Emmert Jr destroyed one of them for his first kill. A second G.55 went down under the guns of Lt Donald MacDonald, while Lt Harper claimed a third Fiat fighter as a probable. All the 318th pilots emerged from the dogfight unscathed.

On 5 May, during the 325th's second mission of the new month, Axis air forces again made their presence known when the group escorted bombers to Turnul Severin railway marshalling yards in Rumania. The mission summary noted that the 325th escorted the B-24s to the target area, where they were forced to turn back due to low fuel. 'Fifteen P-47s were intercepted by approximately 25 FW 190s, MC 205s and Me 109s 40 miles east of the rendezvous point, and by ten Me 109s in the target area. Enemy aircraft attacked in twos and threes from above and then pulled back up. The pilots of the enemy aeroplanes were aggressive and seemed experienced'. Nevertheless, the 325th was able to down four of the Bf 109s against the loss of Lt Arthur Fitch. Individual claims were made by Lts Warren Penny, Ferdinand Suehle, Harold Wolfe and Robert Clark.

Tragedy struck the 'Checkertail Clan' on 12 May, and once again the culprit was bad weather. The group had been tasked with escorting

bombers to Bologna, in Italy, but it encountered heavy cloud that extended to an altitude of 28,000 ft in the target area and prevented the fighters from rendezvousing with the 'heavies'. While feeling their way through this nightmarish overcast, five P-47 pilots spun out and disappeared. Lts John Brower, Joseph Folkes, John Forrest, Edward Nuniveller and Richard Scott were all listed as MIA.

Enemy aircraft were next encountered on 13 May during a fighter sweep over Ferrara, Verona and Lake Garda. As 47 Thunderbolts of the 325th patrolled the target area at altitudes ranging from 24,000 ft up to 28,000 ft, a formation of 20-25 enemy aircraft was observed flying at the same height. The 'Checkertails' quickly engaged the enemy machines, the mission summary stating that 'during 25 minutes of intense combat two Me 109s were destroyed and two others damaged'. One of the kills was credited to Lt Eugene Emmons as his ninth, and final, victory and Lt Frank Butler claimed the other Bf 109 for his third, and final, kill.

The 'Checkertail Clan's' brief, but highly successful, association with the Thunderbolt was now nearing its end, and during the group's final five missions in the P-47 enemy aircraft were encountered only once – on the last mission flown with the Republic fighter, on 25 May 1944. The 325th was providing penetration escort for bombers attacking the airfield at Wöllersdorf, in Austria, when, shortly after rendezvousing with the bombers, a flight of 15 enemy aircraft bounced the formation northwest of Zagreb. They were in turn bounced by the 'Checkertails', who shot down six Bf 109s. Lt Don Kerns led the scoring by downing two of them for his second and third kills. He was also awarded the DFC for leadership and aggressiveness in this action, the medal citation stating in part;

'He broke up the enemy formation and drove them from the area. During the aerial battle he successfully destroyed two enemy fighters, and saved a fellow pilot from two aggressive enemy fighters. Under his protective cover the bombers were thus enabled to complete a highly successful bombing mission unmolested.'

Another of the Bf 109s was destroyed by Lt Robert Barkey for his fifth kill, making him the 325th's newest ace. The final three victories were claimed by Lts Hiawatha Mohawk, Robert Rausch and Robert Bass. All of the 'Clan's' P-47s returned safely to base.

Thus ended the group's short Thunderbolt era. The rugged P-47 had seen the 'Clan' through some tough combat, and provided pilots with much needed experience for their endeavour in the P-51 Mustang. During the six months that the 325th had been equipped with the Thunderbolt it had flown 97 combat missions, scored 153 victories and suffered 38 losses. Of the latter, only seven were at the hands of enemy aircraft – five P-47s also fell to flak. The remaining losses were attributed to weather, mechanical problems, etc. Six of the 'Clan' became aces while flying the Thunderbolt, namely Maj Herschel 'Herky' Green with ten victories (plus three in the P-40), Lt Eugene Emmons with nine, Maj Lewis W Chick with six victories, Lt George Novotny with five victories (and three in the P-40), Capt William A Rynne with five and Lt Edsel Paulk with five. Five other pilots scored four kills in the Thunderbolt. During this period 66 of the 325th's pilots scored one or more kills in the P-47.

MUSTANG ERA

With the arrival of the P-51 pilots of the 325th FG again found themselves flying an aircraft powered by a liquid-cooled engine, but this time it was a fighter with an unmatched range that could take them much deeper into enemy territory. The Mustang would in turn produce a whole new crop of aces.

The conversion to the North American fighter was completed quickly, and on 27 May the 'Checkertail Clan' flew its first mission in the P-51 – an escort to southern France, where the bombers hit several railway marshalling yards. Enemy aircraft were nowhere to be seen, and the absence of Axis air power continued during the 325th's next two missions to Turin and Wöllersdorf. These three milk runs were just a break-in period for a big adventure that would begin on 2 June 1944.

The 'Checkertail Clan' would now be putting its long-ranged mount to a spectacular new test by undertaking the first Shuttle Mission to the USSR. This mission was classified top secret, and Lt Col 'Chet' Sluder, group CO, only informed four of his HQ staff officers on what was going on so that they could help him with preparations for this historic operation. Sixty-four of the 325th's P-51s were slated for the mission, and numerous members of the group's groundcrew would fly in the escorted B-17s as gunners. Prior to the mission commencing the groundcrew accompanying the fighters were provided with brand new uniforms, which immediately fuelled the 'guard-house' rumours that they were either going home or to England. On the following morning the excitement was quickly quashed as they found themselves being loaded onto B-17s for their trip to Russia.

The outbound trip consisted of escorting the bombers to targets in Debreczen, Hungary, and onward into Russia to Pyriatin. The last leg the was most difficult as 'Chet' Sluder was unable to acquire decent maps

Lt Col 'Chet' Sluder led the first Shuttle Mission to the USSR in his new P-51C 42-103867 *Shimmy III* (Col Chester L Sluder via Tom Ivie)





of Russia, and there was a solid undercast at about 2000 ft that complicated his navigation. Finally, after initially overshooting Pyriatin, he realised his error and led his flock of Mustangs to their assigned landing field. After arrival the 325th FG was welcomed by both the American contingent and its Russian hosts, and wine and dined for the next four days.

On 6 June 42 of the 'Clan's' Mustangs escorted B-17s attacking targets in Galati, Rumania, and this time the Luftwaffe was waiting. Sixteen enemy fighters were encountered in the target area, 'Chet' Sluder noting, 'I clobbered a FW 190 and Capt Roy Hogg nearly got himself killed shoving six more of them off of my tail'. In spite of the attempts on his life Capt Hogg managed to out-duel two Fw 190s and send them both down in flames for his fifth and sixth kills – the 'Clan' now had another new ace. Not to be outdone, Lt Cullen Hoffman also became an ace when he shot a lone Ju 88 down in flames for his fifth kill. The third man to achieve aceship that day was Lt Robert Barkey, who despatched a Bf 109. Future ace Lt Wayne Lowry also downed a Messerschmitt for his first victory. Unfortunately, these victories were not without cost as Lts Mumford and MacDonald failed to return.

Lt Ed Strauss of the 318th FS participated in this mission;

'On the trip out we ran into two lone aeroplanes. One was Russian and the other was a Ju 88, which was immediately shot down [by Cullen Hoffman, who became the first American pilot to shoot down an enemy aircraft while flying from a Russian base]. We picked up the bombers over the target. Bombing results looked to be excellent. Flak over the target was very inaccurate. Just as we left the target Me 109s and FW 190s tried to get at the bombers. I saw enemy fighters all around, but every one of them had

Capt Roy Hogg became an ace on 6 June 1944 when he used his new P-51B 43-24877 *Penrod* to down two Fw 190s during an aerial battle 59 miles northeast of Galati, in Rumania (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

Lt Robert Barkey also became an ace on 6 June 1944 when he downed a Bf 109 over Galati in his P-51B 43-24857 *Dorothy II* (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth)





When Lt Cullen Hoffman downed a Ju 88 during the air battle over Galati on 6 June 1944 he became the third 'Checkertail' pilot to make ace on that date (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

Lt Wayne Lowry was one of the 'Clan's' most aggressive pilots, claiming 11 kills and two probables between 18 March and 7 August 1944. Frustratingly for him, the opportunity to score more victories ended on 7 October when he became a guest of the Germans after running short of fuel and having to bail out east of Treviso, in Italy (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)



at least two P-51s on its tail. Our section had to stay on top for target cover. I landed [at Pyriatin] with plenty of gas.'

The 'Clan' would not take to the air again until 11 June, when the group escorted bombers attacking Fosconi airfield, before flying home to their bases in Italy. The takeoff was not without incident, as one Mustang crashed and eight others had to abort and return to Pyriatin, leaving 52 fighters for the long escort. The P-51 pilots had to deal with 12 Bf 109s that were lining up behind a straggling B-17 over Fosconi, the 'Clan' breaking up the attack by diving directly at the enemy aircraft. Lt Strauss recalled;

'We picked up the bombers near the Rumanian border and subsequently met moderate inaccurate flak over the target. As we left we encountered a few Me 109s, but they would split-s as soon as we approached, and our orders were not to follow them. The 318th ran into quite a few of them, and shot down three. We had a small rat race when an olive drab P-51 of the 31st FG jumped us. We left the bombers over Nis, in Yugoslavia.'

The three Bf 109s were claimed by future aces Benjamin Emmert (his second kill) and Richard Deakins (his fourth), while the third Messerschmitt was downed by Ferdinand Suehle. This proved to be his third, and last, victory. Maj 'Herky' Green also managed to damage a Fw 190.

Upon returning to its base at Lesina, the 325th stood down for a day in order to rest the pilots and have their Mustangs checked over. The 'Clan's' next mission was flown on 13 June, and it began rather ominously. Two Mustangs crashed on takeoff and as the remaining fighters were forming up two others were involved in a mid-air collision that killed Lt Kidder. The other pilot was able to safely land his aircraft. As the rest of the group headed for escort duties over Munich, no fewer than 11 Mustangs returned to base due to mechanical problems, leaving only 34 to escort the B-24s to the target area.

Once over Munich 23 enemy fighters were encountered, with two of them being shot down by Lts Wayne Lowry and Paul Tatman. The former later described his second victory;

'I was so sure of my new found power in the P-51 that I actually trapped a Me 109 at 30,000 ft while I was at 20,000 ft. He kept trying to get away and I kept cutting him off. I must have stalled out 50 times trying to get to his altitude. The Mustang was really screaming over such treatment, as I relaxed full power only momentarily to boot her out of the notion of flipping. I suppose there were moments when I could have been clobbered, but somewhere around 28,000 ft the German pilot lost his nerve and attempted to dive by me. That was his mistake, and it led to a one way trip to Valhalla for him.'

Somehow Maj 'Herky' Green got separated from his squadron during



the dogfight and headed back to base alone. Upon reaching the Udine area, he came across a flight of six C.202s at 32,000 ft. He chased the Macchis for four minutes before finally catching up with them about 20 miles northeast of Venice. As he closed in from 'six o'clock', three of the enemy aircraft rolled over and headed for the deck. The remaining three, obviously unaware of his presence, continued to fly straight and level. Green opened fire on the last aeroplane in the formation, and as it staggered under the impact of his gunfire the other two C.202 pilots split-essed and dove away. His target suffered many hits in the fuselage, causing an explosion that started a fire. Moments later Maj Green saw his 14th victim crash, after which the ace continued on to Lesina. All 34 participating Mustangs made it safely back to base.

On 15 June the 325th FG, along with four other Fifteenth Air Force fighter groups, was sent on a massive strafing mission along the coast of southern France. The bad luck that had affected the group two days earlier struck again on the 15th. The 'Clan' took off and went into a line abreast formation as it crossed the Tyrrhenian Sea. As they approached the target area, the P-51 pilots noticed that their assigned airfields had already been attacked, so they searched for targets of opportunity.

The first mishap occurred when Lt Lott's air scoop hit the water and he bounced over his wingman and crashed into the sea. As the 319th FS dived on a railway marshalling yard Lts Reed and Rosar both hit high-tension wires. Rosar's fighter lost a wing and he died when the Mustang exploded upon hitting the ground. Reed, however, bailed out at 1000 ft. After the strafing began in earnest, Lt Starck was shot down by a Bf 109 whilst attacking an airfield. Lt Rausch also fell to Bf 109s, two of which got onto his tail as he flew over the French coast. The final loss

Maj Herschel Green readies for a mission in his P-51C 42-103324. Although this is one of his better known aircraft, Green only managed one damaged claim – a Fw 190 on 11 June 1944 – while flying it (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

Lt Cecil Dean claimed six destroyed and two damaged during his tour with the 317th FS (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth)



of the day was Maj Woods, whose Mustang had been hit by flak over the target area and then burst into flames over the sea as he headed for home. Seen to bail out, he was listed as MIA.

On a more positive note Lt Hiawatha Mohawk shot down a Bf 109 and destroyed a Ju 88 on the ground. Other pilots from the 325th also successfully strafed several railway targets and a coal mine(!), but these claims in no way compensated for the heavy losses suffered by the 'Checkertail Clan' on this ill-fated mission.

On 16 June the Fifteenth Air Force began directing its attention to targets in eastern Europe, with a special emphasis on Axis oil supplies. On that date the 325th FG escorted B-24s to the Nova oil refinery at Schwechat, in Austria. The group encountered 11 enemy aircraft just north of Lake Balaton and destroyed four of them, Lt Richard Deakins ripping into the formation and quickly downing a Bf 109 for his fifth kill to make ace. At about the same time future ace Lt Wayne Lowry scored his third kill in ten days by adding another Bf 109 to his list of victims. The scoring was rounded out by Lts Paul Jensen and John Reynolds with a Bf 109 each, and single probables were claimed by Lts Don Kerns and W A Murphy. All P-51s returned safely home.

After an uneventful escort mission to railway targets in Italy on 22 June, the 'Clan' was directed to escort B-17s to a real hot spot – the oil fields at Ploesti, in Rumania – the following day. The Luftwaffe, as expected, was up in force to meet the attack, and at least 35 enemy aircraft were engaged by the 'Checkertails' near the target. When the air battle ended the outcome was a virtual draw, the 325th having downed four fighters for the loss of three of its own. One of the successful pilots was Maj 'Herky' Green, who sent a Bf 109 down in flames for his 15th kill and damaged another. He reported;

'I saw three Me 109s below us turning toward the bombers. I dived after them and came in on the tail of the last Me 109 and fired a long burst. I saw hits all along the fuselage and engine, and it burst into flame before spinning to earth completely out of control.'

Lt Cecil Dean flamed a Fw 190 for his fifth kill and future ace John Simmons destroyed another Focke-Wulf for his first victory. He had been leading a flight at 27,000 ft when he observed two Fw 190s coming in from '12 o'clock high'. Another flight chased one of them and Simmons led his flight down after the second Focke-Wulf. The German pilot saw him and executed a split-s in an attempt to get away, but Simmons followed. When the Fw 190 pulled out of its manoeuvre at 15,000 ft Lt Simmons fired several short bursts. The enemy fighter took numerous hits in the tail section, left wing and in the cockpit before large pieces began flying off and the Fw 190 went into a spin and crashed. Lt P J Kastner closed out the scoring by blasting another Fw 190 out of the sky. On the debit side, Lts E L Mueller, P C Osterhaus and D C Hanson all had to take to their parachutes over the target area.

The 325th FG returned to Ploesti on 24 June, and this time it was met by a mixed force of German and Rumanian fighters consisting of Bf 109s, Fw 190s and Rumanian IAR 80s and 81s. The air battle that followed also turned out to be an ace maker, for Lt Wayne Lowry scored a double for his fourth and fifth kills – he despatched a Bf 109 and a Fw 190. Two other aces increased their respective scores to six

as Cecil Dean downed an IAR 80 and Richard Deakins flamed a Fw 190. Two more Bf 109s and an IAR 80 were also claimed as probables. Lt J W Harper was shot down, however, his Mustang last being seen with six Bf 109s on its tail.

A second mission was flown that afternoon, when ten of the 'Clan's' P-51s escorted a PBY Catalina on a search and rescue mission over Lake Lesina. Another pilot was lost in the process, Lt H F Welch apparently flying too close to enemy flak positions near Pescara and being shot down into the water.

On 26 June the 325th participated in the second Shuttle Mission to Russia, escorting Eighth Air Force B-17s targeting the Debreczen railway marshalling yards in Hungary. The group rendezvoused with the Fortresses near the target area and covered the B-17s all the way to Italy, where the bombers completed their second leg of the shuttle. This mission was followed up the next day with a fighter sweep over the Budapest area, which was for the most part uneventful. Only three enemy aircraft were observed, and Lt Cecil Dean managed to damage two of them (Bf 110s) before departing the scene when his fuel ran low.

On 28 June the 325th flew another fighter sweep, this time to Bucharest, in Rumania. The Mustangs stirred up a hornets' nest over the Rumanian capital, with 47 enemy aircraft engaging the 40 'Clan' machines as they swept over the area from 29,000 ft down to the deck for an hour between 0930-1030 hrs. In a series of running dogfights the 325th racked up no fewer than 17 kills for no losses. Several future aces contributed to this lopsided victory, with the top scorer being Flt Off Robert Brown with three Bf 109s destroyed and a fourth as a probable. Next was Lt Arthur Fiedler with two Bf 109s destroyed, Lt Barrie Davis with a Fw 190, Lt John Simmons with a Bf 109 (his second victory in five days) and Flt Off Philip Sangermano with an IAR 80. Finally, ace Lt Wayne Lowry also destroyed a Fw 190 for his sixth victory. John Simmons reported;

'I observed four enemy aircraft heading toward my formation at "ten o'clock" and led my flight into a turn to the left and closed on the enemy aircraft from astern. I fired several short bursts from 1000 ft down to 200 ft, and saw hits on the tail, cockpit and base of both wings of the Me 109, which then exploded.'



Lt Robert H Brown was assigned to the 318th FS in late April 1944 and began his scoring run on 28 June. By 24 August 1944 he had raised his tally to seven destroyed, one probable and one damaged to become an ace (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

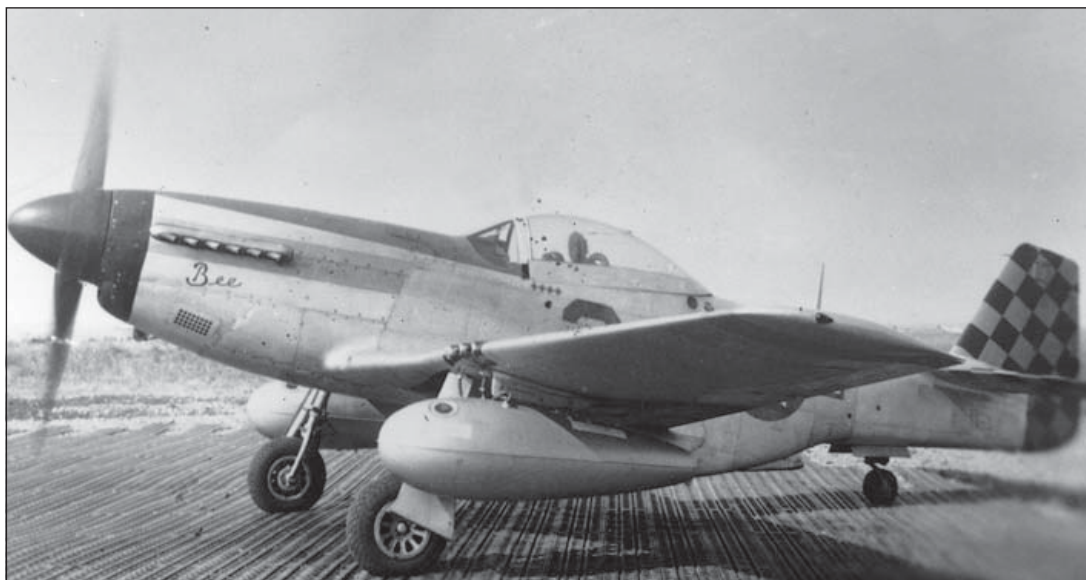
Five minutes later Simmons' wingman, Lt Paul Kastner, shot down another of the Bf 109s for his third, and last, victory. The remaining kills were credited to Lt L J Stacey, who downed two Bf 109s, while Lts William Pomerantz, George Sweeney, W A Murphy and Henry Greve claimed one Messerschmitt each. Lt Paul Jensen added to the day's total by flaming an IAR 80.

During this period the 325th FG played host to the 334th FS/4th FG of the Eighth Air Force, as the latter squadron was still performing Shuttle Mission sorties. Throughout their stay at Lesina the pilots of the 334th displayed a somewhat condescending attitude towards the 325th in particular and the Fifteenth Air Force in general, insinuating that they were playing a support role in the war and facing only weak and inexperienced Axis units. This superior attitude greatly annoyed the pilots of the 325th, who knew damn well that they were facing some tough opponents in the air. Even Col Sluder noticed what was going on, and noted, 'They obviously felt that we were in the bush leagues and treated us with bored tolerance. The next morning they were scheduled to go on a mission with us, and leisurely drifted into the S-2 hut for the briefing, gazing vacantly out the door while the mission was briefed'.

On 2 July the pilots from the 334th FS would learn the hard way that they had been very much mistaken in their outlook about operations in the MTO. The mission was a massive fighter sweep ahead of B-24s attacking rail and petroleum targets in and around Budapest, the combined forces of the 325th, 52nd and 4th FGs providing the fighter screen. The enemy was also up in force, and all three USAAF fighter groups met stiff opposition. The 325th encountered 40 Axis aircraft, the 52nd engaged 60+ and the 4th found itself overwhelmed by 75-80 enemy fighters.

All three groups scored victories during the swirling air battles over Hungary. For the 325th it was a bittersweet day as its pilots destroyed two Bf 109s and claimed another as a probable, but the group lost ace Cecil Dean and Lt J A Murphy in a mid-air collision. Dean was fortunate

P-51D 44-13451 *Bee* was the aircraft of ace Lt Barrie S Davis, who scored two of his six victories in it. The fighter's name was later changed to *Honey Bee* (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)



enough to bail out and became a PoW, but Murphy died in his aircraft. Both of the Bf 109s were downed by future ace Barrie Davis, who later described his second and third victories to the 'Clan's' public relations officer;

'I'll never forget the day that I remained behind to escort some cripples home. We were jumped, but somehow only a single Me 109 remained to press the attack. I got in behind him finally and, unable to shake me, he rolled over and headed straight for the deck. We started the dive at about 25,000 ft, and with everything bent past the firewall we were travelling at well past 550 mph as we dived through 20,000 ft. My guns were spraying the sky, but not a damned thing was happening to the Me 109. Finally, at about 15,000 ft, bits of his aeroplane began coming off. First a bit of the wing tip, then what looked like cowling, then other parts. They streaked past my fuselage, scaring the devil out of me in the process. I couldn't lay a gun on the guy though and I was shooting from sheer fright now.

'Finally, we must have been below 10,000 ft when the German jettisoned his canopy, struggled upward, pushed outward twice and finally bailed out. His chute was ripped to pieces as he sailed past me. I felt right sick about it – I guess nobody gets hardened to death.

'I blacked out when I hauled back on the stick to pull out of the dive. When I came to my aeroplane was flying upward through 18,000 ft and still climbing.

'Up ahead I saw a flak burst and then I began to wonder what 20 mm flak was doing at 20,000 ft. I broke, right or left – I don't remember – and sitting behind me popping out cannon shells was another Me 109! I finally tacked onto his tail, and this time my shooting was a bit improved. I knocked out his oil coolers and set him afire. The oil dumped all over my aeroplane and wrapped up the windshield and wings, and I flew blind all the way back to Lesina.'

The 4th FG met some aggressive enemy aircraft in its area, and while the group was able to claim eight enemy aircraft destroyed, it lost five of its own pilots, including high-scoring ace Lt Ralph 'The Kidd' Hofer. In addition to the losses its squadron leader, Capt Howard 'Deacon' Hively, and Lt Grover Siems both returned to Lesina badly wounded in aircraft that looked like sieves. After this mission the surviving members of the 334th were somewhat chastened, and had to admit that they were wrong in their earlier assessment of aerial combat in the MTO. In addition to the combined kills by the 325th and 4th FGs, the 52nd FG destroyed eight enemy aircraft on 2 July.

The 'Clan' escorted B-24s attacking oil storage facilities at Giurgiu, in Rumania, the following day, and the raid was again opposed by a large number of enemy fighters. Forty-one were engaged in the target area and five were sent down in flames by the gunfire of Lts Jack Houghton, Bruce Cobb, S E Myers, L J Stacey and R S Bass. All were Bf 109s except Houghton's, which was a Fw 190. Maj J S Perry claimed another Bf 109 as a probable and Lts D J Schmerbeck and W R Hinton damaged two more. All of the 325th's aircraft returned safely.

The 'Clan' was back over Rumania again on 4 July, but this time the enemy chose not to challenge the group. Only six Axis fighters were observed, and they stayed a safe distance away from the Mustangs.

Two days later the 325th escorted B-17s targeting the railway marshalling yards in Verona, and this time a small mixed formation of German and Italian fighters attempted to attack the bombers. In the brief dogfight that ensued, Lt Jack Houghton destroyed a Bf 109 and Lt Leland Stacey damaged a C.205. Lt Kenneth Ostrum was lost in return, however, his fighter last being seen performing a diving attack on enemy aircraft. He was later reported as MIA.

Oil production was again the target for Fifteenth Air Force B-17s on 7 July, and this time the 'Clan' escorted them to the Blechhammer oil refinery in Germany. Only 13 Bf 109s were sent up against the bombers, and the 'Clan' shot two of them down and damaged two others. The kills were awarded to Lts Bruce C Cobb and Jack H Bond, while the two damaged Bf 109s were shot up by Maj 'Herky' Green. Unfortunately, the elation of adding two more kills to the 325th's ever growing scoreboard was quickly silenced when the Mustang flown by Lt Frank Soltesz inexplicably blew up in mid-air without any warning, killing him instantly. The mission report narrative speculated that the explosion was caused by a mechanical failure.

On 8 July the 325th travelled to Austria while escorting B-17s that were to bomb the airfield at Zwölfaxing, the 'Clan' providing penetration, target and withdrawal support for the bombers. During the flight 11 unidentified twin-engined enemy aircraft were observed, but not engaged. Then a dogfight broke out with a gaggle of 13 Bf 109s that had used cloud cover to sneak in and bounce some of the Fortresses. One B-17 was seen to explode, another dropped out of formation in flames in the target area and a third bomber crashed during the flight home. In spite of the 325th's late arrival on the scene, Lt Wayne Lowry destroyed one of the Bf 109s for his seventh victory and probably destroyed another before the remaining German fighters fled for home.

In a further attempt to cleanse as many enemy fighters from the air as possible, the following day the 'Clan' travelled to the Bucharest-Ploesti area on a fighter sweep ahead of oncoming bomber formations. The enemy was not totally cooperative, however, as only 11 Axis fighters were encountered in two separate dogfights that resulted in the destruction of one Bf 109 – two others were damaged.

The day's solitary kill was scored by Maj 'Herky' Green in an aerial battle that took place 20 miles southeast of Ploesti. Having led his 317th FS on an uneventful sweep of the area, he engaged German fighters after hearing a call for help from the bombers. Making a 90-degree turn and diving from 28,000 ft, Maj Green closed to within 600 ft of a Bf 109 and damaged it, before breaking off to bounce another Messerschmitt that was on the tail of a P-51. Apparently, the German pilot of the latter machine had forgotten the fighter pilot's cardinal rule to 'check six', because Maj Green slipped in behind him completely unnoticed and opened fire. After firing several short bursts Green saw large chunks of the fuselage fly off and the Bf 109 began smoking. As he closed for the second time and opened fire on the crippled fighter, its pilot bailed out. Maj Green had just scored his 16th victory.

Future ace Lt Harry Parker damaged another Bf 109 for his first claim. By month-end his tally would stand at eight Messerschmitts destroyed and seven damaged.

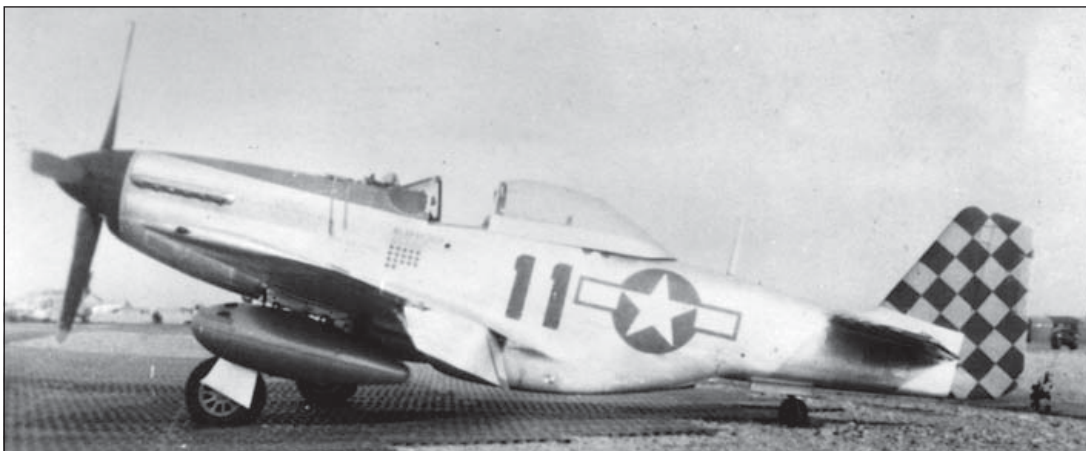


The missions of 12 and 13 July turned out to be milk runs, and in both cases no enemy aircraft were observed throughout the missions. The Luftwaffe finally showed its face again during an escort to the Porto Marghera oil storage facility in Italy, although cloud cover limited any encounters. Once the target had been successfully attacked Maj 'Herky' Green led his 317th FS on a fighter sweep of the Ferrara area, and he soon spotted a flight of 20 enemy aircraft shadowing a flight of medium bombers.

As the Mustangs of the 317th started to dive on the Bf 109s, the enemy pilots spotted them and all bar one broke for cloud cover. The German that did not follow his comrades paid for his mistake with his life. As he belatedly attempted to dive away from Green's oncoming Mustang, the 325th's ranking ace opened fire at 700 ft. Four short bursts scored numerous hits in the left wing and the cockpit area. The Bf 109 staggered from the impact, shed a large portion of its fuselage skinning and then exploded. A second Messerschmitt was hunted down and damaged by Maj C E Caple to end the day's scoring.

P-51D 44-13642 was Capt Harry Parker's first D-model Mustang, and he used the fighter to claim eight victories. He also damaged a further six enemy aircraft while flying it (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

Maj Herschel H Green's P-51D 44-13498 was photographed in July 1944 after his 17th kill, which occurred on the 14th of that month (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)



Rumanian oil was again the target on 15 July when the 325th FG escorted B-24s to Ploesti, although no enemy fighters were observed. After being released from its escort duties the group found five B-17s heading home alone, so it formed up around them. Shortly thereafter the 'Clan' had to fend off an attack by P-38s whose pilots clearly needed a little more work on their aircraft identification skills. Fortunately, no damage was done, and all the Mustangs made it safely back to base.

After two straight escort missions to petroleum targets the 325th flew a fighter sweep on 16 July to Vienna. During the sweep, which lasted from 1000 hrs to 1105 hrs, the 'Clan' encountered a large formation of Bf 110s for the first time. About half of the German force quickly showed its reluctance to engage Mustangs by retreating into a large cloud bank. The remaining gaggle of 15-20 Messerschmitts did not escape, however, and in a matter of minutes four of them had been shot down – two by Lt Robert Black and one each by Lt Col Ernest Beverly and Lt Bruce Cobb.

In addition to these kills the 'Clan' claimed three more Bf 110s without firing a shot. As Lts Stanley DeGrear, Horace Self Jr and Edwin R Williams dived to attack three more of the twin-engined fighters that were approaching the bomber formations, the pilot of the Bf 110 in the centre of the three enemy aeroplanes saw them coming and panicked. He attempted to evade the attack by quickly flipping over and heading down between the other two Bf 110s, but in doing so his wings hit both of his wingmen and all three enemy aircraft went out of control and crashed almost simultaneously. Williams later commented, 'His wingtips struck those aeroplanes and all three crashed together. The air was filled with a mass of motors, wings and tails'. Per the mission report for 16 July 1944, these kills were credited as a 'Group claim', rather than individual credit being awarded to the three pilots that forced the mid-air collision.

The 'Clan' travelled to Friedrichshafen, in Germany, on 18 July, escorting bombers attacking fuel facilities. This turned out to be a milk run, as no enemy aircraft attempted to block the approach of the B-24s. The 325th FG returned to Germany the following day, this time to Munich, and again met with only minimal opposition in the form of five Bf 109s – three of which were promptly shot down by Lts J R Oxner, S E Myers and D J Schmerbeck.

During the next four missions (all escorting bombers to oil production facilities) not a single enemy fighter rose to challenge the attacks, and the 'Clan' had to turn to strafing ground targets on its way home. On 23 July pilots from the 325th strafed targets in the Yugoslavian cities of Prizren and Dakovica, scoring numerous hits on vehicles and buildings in Prizren and shooting up the telephone exchange in the latter city. Lt Austin Watkins was lost during this mission, however.

On 24 July the 325th FG escorted bombers heading southwest rather than northeast, with the airfield at Chanoines, in France, being attacked. Forty-one of the 'Clan's' Mustangs rendezvoused with the bombers as they neared the target area at 1200 hrs, and escorted them for the next 50 minutes. Two Bf 109 pilots made a foolhardy attempt to attack the bombers, and one of them was shot down for his efforts. Lt Wayne Lowry saw the attack and described his encounter with the luckless fighter;

'On our escort mission to Chanoines airdrome I observed a Me 109 break away from four P-51s. My wingman and I continued the attack,

and after a few tight turns, wingovers and chandelles I closed on him and got a few hits. Then I closed to 500 ft and saw many hits in the engine, lower fuselage and some in the cockpit area. After receiving these hits the pilot bailed out, and a few moments later his Me 109 exploded in mid-air.'

Lt Art Fiedler confirmed Lowry's ninth victory.

The next day the 'Clan' returned to more familiar territory when it escorted B-17s targeting the Herman Göring tank works in Linz, Austria. As the formations approached the target area the 325th was again met with a feeble effort by the Luftwaffe. Seven Bf 109s were encountered as

they attempted a head-on attack on the bombers, P-51s following the enemy fighters and making quick work of four of them. Two of the Messerschmitts gave Lt Harry Parker his first kills, the rising star of the 325th reporting that Bf 109s had dived through the bomber formation, and he had followed two of them;

'I dived astern of the rearmost Me 109 and fired from 1200 yards down to 20 yards. I saw many hits all over the Me 109, and it seemed to fall apart at 8000 ft. After destroying this enemy aircraft I was so close that I had to dive under it, before pulling up astern of the second Me 109. I fired a long burst at this enemy aircraft from 100 yards, closing to 50 yards. Many hits were seen entering the fuselage and wings, and shortly thereafter there were several explosions. During this action the Me 109 was smoking profusely, and I saw pieces coming off the aeroplane as it headed earthward.'

Parker's wingman, Lt Benjamin Emmert, confirmed both kills. The remaining two kills were credited to Lts Harold Wolfe and Henry Greve. Capt Richard Dunkin added to the count by claiming another Bf 109 as a probable.

Zwölfaxing airfield was targeted yet again on 26 July, and this time the Luftwaffe was up in strength to meet the bomber formations. The 325th received a distress call from a group of unescorted B-17s shortly before rendezvousing with the B-24s, and 22 of the 'Clan's' 36 Mustangs rushed to their rescue. Upon reaching the Fortresses, the P-51 pilots quickly noticed that the bombers were taking a real pounding. They immediately went after the enemy force, breaking up their latest attack. Eight of the Mustangs were led by Lt Wayne Lowry, who reported;

'Forty enemy aircraft were attacking the B-17s and I led my flight after them. During our attack I saw three FW 190s on the tail of my wingman [Lt Henry Greve]. I latched onto them and then followed the one that broke off from the others as they dived away. I followed the FW 190 down and fired a few ineffective bursts, but when he went into a tight turn on the deck I was able to close to 500 ft and hit him with a telling burst.



'Art' Fiedler poses with his P-51D *Helen* after his second victory, which occurred over Bucharest on 28 June 1944 (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth)



Wayne Lowry is seen here in his P-51D *My Gal Sal* in August 1944, the fighter's scoreboard now reflecting his full score of 11 victories (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

Capt 'Art' Fiedler's P-51D *Helen* was photographed in late 1944 displaying a score of seven victories. Fiedler would later add one more kill marking, indicating his final victory over a Fw 190 near Regensburg on 20 January 1945 (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)



I saw hits on the engine and cockpit, and at about 300 ft the FW 190 burst into flame and exploded.'

This was victory number ten for Lt Lowry.

Future ace Lt Art Fiedler picks up the action;

'On the mission to Zwölfaxing airdrome my section encountered approximately 40 enemy aircraft at 22,000 ft and we went into action. As I was manoeuvring after a FW 190 I saw two other enemy aircraft and turned into them. This manoeuvre led to a fight to the deck with one of the FW 190s. While chasing him I saw another FW 190 below at "seven o'clock" and turned after him. I closed from "three

o'clock" and fired a burst from 200 yards and hit him in the cockpit. Shortly afterwards the FW 190 straightened out from a turn, rolled over and from about 50 ft headed down and crashed and exploded.'

Another future ace, Capt Richard Dunkin, joined in the action, noting;

'I observed 40 enemy aircraft preparing to attack the bombers. I led my flight down from 27,000 ft to 24,000 ft, where we scattered the enemy aircraft. Then I closed on a FW 190 from dead astern and opened fire at 275 yards, closing to about 100 yards. Blue smoke began pouring from the fuselage below the cockpit and the enemy aircraft went into a spin at 21,000 ft and was seen to explode when it crashed. I then observed a Me 109 at 21,000 ft and dove after him, opening fire from 250 yards from "six o'clock" as he made a gentle turn to the left. Direct hits were scored on the fuselage in front of, and around, the cockpit, and the Me 109, smoking profusely, was seen to crash and burn.'

Both kills were confirmed by Lt Roper. These were Capt Dunkin's fifth and sixth victories, making him the 'Clan's' newest ace. He did not enjoy that accolade for long, however, as a few minutes later Lt Art Fiedler downed a Bf 109 for his fifth victory;

'On the way home from the mission to Zwölfaxing airdrome, while flying at 11,000 ft, my leader, Lt Wayne Lowry, and I saw a Me 109 on the deck and we went after it. Lt Lowry opened fire but quickly ran out of ammo, so he told me to go after the Me 109. I closed in and opened fire, and the enemy aircraft started smoking immediately and went into a gentle turn. I closed to 75 yards and fired again, observing hits on its wings and fuselage. Shortly afterwards

the Me 109 exploded, spraying oil all over my windshield and left wing. The pilot was seen to bail out at 50 ft, but his 'chute did not open.'

By the time the aerial battles had ended 13 enemy fighters had been destroyed and another was listed as a probable. The remaining eight aircraft were downed by Maj John Peery, Capt Sheldon Farnham and Lts John Kinney, Jack Bond, Paul Tatman, W P Hinton, E T Strauss and V A Woodman. Capt Farnham also claimed a Bf 109 as a probable, while Lt H C Wolfe damaged four other Messerschmitts. Lt Henry Greve and Lt H M Self were lost in return. During the initial attack by Lt Lowry's section, Lt Greve had become separated from the formation whilst flying as 'tail end Charlie'. He bravely fought off any enemy aircraft trying to come in behind his section, damaging four or five of them before he was shot down with severe wounds. Greve ended up in a PoW camp, and six months later he was reunited with Lt Lowry after he too was captured.

On 27 July the 'Clan' escorted B-24s sent to attack the Manfred Weiss armament works in Budapest, and engaged enemy fighters several times during the mission. Five Bf 109s were destroyed and two damaged in these clashes, with two future aces adding to their respective tallies. Lt Robert Brown reported his fourth kill as follows;

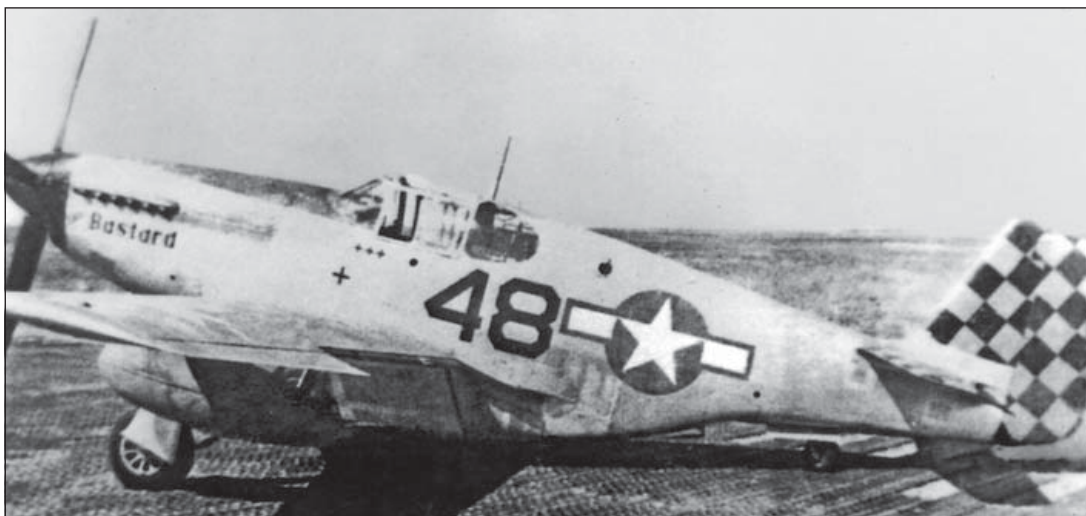
'I observed two Me 109s from 24,000 ft, and when one of them peeled off to the left I followed him down and opened fire at 300 yards with 60 degrees of deflection. I then closed to 50 ft and fired again. Many hits were seen to enter the enemy aircraft's tail and right wing. As a result of these hits the enemy aircraft's tail broke off and the crash was observed by Lts Woodson and Roper.'

Harry Parker's second victory was a similar story;

'I was flying at 25,000 ft when I observed a Me 109 at "three o'clock" and I closed and opened fire at 400 yards with 90 degrees deflection. I then closed again to 50 yards and opened fire with 70 degrees deflection. I saw many hits on the enemy aircraft's fuselage and tail. He pulled up quickly and his tail broke off, sending him crashing to earth. Lt Gaston confirmed.'

Lts Jack Houghton, John Conant and Sam Brown accounted for the remaining three Bf 109s (*text continues on page 65*).

P-51C 42-103562 *Little Bastard*, displaying three of Lt Robert Brown's victories, rests between missions at Lesina during the summer of 1944 (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth)



COLOUR PLATES

1

P-40F-20 41-20006 *MORTIMER*
SNERD/STUD of Lt Col Robert
 Baseler, 325th FG CO, Mateur,
 Tunisia, August 1943



2

P-40L-1 42-10436 *Duchess of*
Durham IV of Capt Ralph
 G 'Zack' Taylor, 317th FS, Mateur,
 Tunisia, August 1943



3

P-40F-15 41-19896 of Lt Walter
 B 'Bud' Walker, 317th FS, Mateur,
 Tunisia, August 1943



4

P-47D (serial unknown) *The Star of Altoona* of Capt Bunn Heam, HQ 325th FG, Foggia, Italy, January 1944



5

P-47D-16 42-76021 *Rocky* of Lt Col Lewis W Chick, 317th FS CO, Lesina, Italy, March 1944



6

P-47D (serial unknown) of Maj Herschel H 'Herky' Green, 317th FS CO, Lesina, Italy, May 1944



7

P-47D-6 42-74957
of Lt Cecil O
Dean, 317th FS,
Lesina, Italy,
May 1944



8

P-47D-16
42-75737 HUN
HUNTER of Lt
Eugene Emmons,
317th FS, Lesina,
Italy, May 1944



9

P-47D-16
42-75971
Ruthless Ruthie/
Lady Janie VI of
Lt George
Novotny, 317th
FS, Lesina, Italy,
April 1944



10

P-47D-15
42-75829 *GINGER*
of Capt William
A Rynne, 317th
FS, Lesina, Italy,
March 1944



11

P-47D (serial
unknown) *Little
Sir Echo* of
Lt Edsel Paulk,
317th FS, Lesina,
Italy, April 1944



12

P-47D (serial
unknown) of
Capt Frank 'Spot'
Collins, 319th FS,
Lesina, Italy,
January 1944





13
P-47D-16
42-75971
*Ruthless Ruthie/
Lady Janie VI*
of Lt John
Simmons, 317th
FS, Lesina, Italy,
May 1944



14
P-47D-23
42-75008 *BIG
STUD* of Lt Col
Robert L Baseler,
325th FG CO,
Lesina, Italy,
April 1944



15
P-51C-1 42-103324
of Maj Herschel H
'Herky' Green,
317th FS CO,
Lesina, Italy,
June 1944



16
P-51B-15 42-106943
of Lt Benjamin H
Emmert Jr, 318th FS,
Lesina, Italy,
June 1944



17
P-51C-5 42-103562
Little Bastard of
Lt Robert H Brown,
318th FS, Lesina,
Italy, July 1944



18
P-51C-10 42-103867
SHIMMY III of Lt Col
Chester L. 'Chet'
Sluder, 325th FG CO,
Lesina, Italy,
June 1944

19

P-51C-5 42-103581
Mary Norris of Lt
 Phillip Sangermano,
 318th FS, Lesina,
 Italy, August 1944



20

P-51B-15 43-24822 of
 Lt Richard Deakins,
 318th FS, Lesina,
 Italy, June 1944



21

P-51B-5 43-6861
Funnyface of Lt Oscar
 Rau, 318th FS, Lesina,
 Italy, November 1944



22

P-51B-15 43-24877
Penrod of Capt Roy
 Hogg, 318th FS,
 Lesina, Italy,
 June 1944



23

P-51B-15 43-24857
Dorothy-II of Capt
 Robert M Barkey,
 319th FS, Lesina,
 Italy, June 1944



24

P-51B-15 43-24893 of
 Capt Raymond
 E Hartley Jr, 319th FS
 CO, Lesina, Italy,
 June 1944





25
P-51D-5 44-13336
THISIZIT of Capt
Richard Dunkin,
317th FS, Lesina,
Italy, August 1944



26
P-51D-5 44-13498
Miss Ridge of Maj
Herschel H Green,
317th FS CO, Lesina,
Italy, July 1944



27
P-51D (serial number
unknown) *My Gal Sal*
of Lt Wayne Lowry,
317th FS, Lesina,
Italy, August 1944

28

P-51D-5 44-13451 *Bee*
of Lt Barrie S Davis,
317th FS, Lesina,
Italy, August 1944



29

P-51D-5 44-13322
Devastating Dottie/
Miss Janie VIII of Lt
John M Simmons Jr,
317th FS, Lesina,
Italy, August 1944



30

P-51D-5 44-13777
Helen of Capt
Arthur C Fiedler Jr
of the 317th FS,
Lesina, Italy,
September 1944



31

P-51D-10 44-14467
MARY MAC of Lt
Gordon H McDaniel,
318th FS, Rimini,
Italy, March 1945



32

P-51D-16 44-15128
Texas Jessie/Big
Mike of Lt William
E Aron, 318th FS,
Rimini, Italy,
March 1945



33

P-51D-10 44-14400 of
Capt Harry A Parker,
318th FS, Rimini,
Italy, March 1945





34
P-51D-20 44-63512
Shu-Shu/Chuck O of
Maj Norman
McDonald, 318th FS
CO, Mondolfo, Italy,
April 1945



35
P-51D (serial
unknown) of Lt
Cullen Hoffman,
317th FS, Lesina,
Italy, June 1944



36
BF 109G
Hoimann, flown
by Lt Col Bob
Baseler, 325th FG
CO, Mateur,
Tunisia,
June 1943

Lt Harry Parker continued his scoring streak when the 325th FG flew to Ploesti once again on 28 July, the group escorting B-24s that were tasked with attacking the Standard Oil and Astra Romano refineries. As the bombers came away from the target a gaggle of 30 Bf 109s and Fw 190s was seen circling and waiting to bounce the bombers. The P-51 pilots dived on the Axis fighters, breaking up the formation and then individually dogfighting with their opponents. By the time this clash was over three Bf 109s and Fw 190s had gone down in flames, two of them under the guns of future aces Harry Parker and Ben Emmert.

Lt Parker's fourth victory in the past 72 hours was yet another Bf 109, which he swooped down on and then showered with many hits as he closed to within 150 yards of his foe. The Messerschmitt exploded in mid air. Lt Emmert's fourth kill was also a Bf 109, as he recalled in his encounter report;

'I dove on a flight of three or four Me 109s and they immediately headed for the deck, and I followed one of them. I opened fire from 250 yards directly astern of him and closed to about 30 yards, noticing numerous hits in the tail and on the fuselage, after which he crash-landed. Lt Woodson confirmed.'

Lt Gerald Edwards destroyed a Fw 190 and Lt Paul Jensen flamed a Bf 109 to round out the scoring. Lt John Roper, however, was forced to bail out after suffering engine trouble deep in enemy territory.

Action then shifted on 30 July to Budapest, when B-24s attacked the airfield near the city. It turned out to be a quiet mission, for only 12 enemy aircraft were observed and they quickly turned away from the bombers so as to avoid combat with the 'Clan's' Mustangs. Shortly afterwards, however, Lt Wayne Lowry spotted a light grey Bf 109 and quickly shot it down for his tenth victory.

Oil facilities were again the target on 31 July when the 325th travelled to Bucharest. The target on this occasion was the Mogosaia oil storage facility, which proved to be heavily defended by Axis fighters. The 'Clan' spotted 40 Bf 109s and five Fw 190s at 27,000 ft, and when the group began its climb towards the gaggle of German fighters, the enemy aircraft formed a large Lufbery circle and stayed in it as they slowly lost altitude. This defensive tactic failed to protect the enemy machines, as the 'Clan' tore the formation apart. Lt Parker had his best day with four kills, and he damaged six others before he finished. He reported;

'I climbed to attack approximately 40 Me 109s that were at 27,000 ft. The enemy aircraft went into a tight Lufbery and I came in on one of the Me 109s from "six o'clock" and opened fire from 300 yards with 60-degree deflection. I then closed in dead astern of the enemy aircraft and fired from about 20 yards. I observed many hits all over the aeroplane and its right wing fell off. The enemy aircraft went straight down, and its crash was confirmed by Lt Emmert.

'After destroying this Me 109 I turned into another at 22,000 ft and fired from 300 yards down to 200 yards with 60 to 30 degrees deflection. I observed a few hits on the wings and fuselage of the enemy aircraft, then the pilot bailed out and his 'chute did not open.

'With the Me 109s that I attacked still in a Lufbery, I attacked a third Me 109 in a tight turn. I fired from 300 yards with 60 degrees deflection and closed to 200 yards, firing with 20 degrees deflection. I saw a few

hits on the wings and fuselage before the pilot bailed out and the Me 109 went down trailing smoke. I now attacked a fourth Me 109 at 4000 ft and the enemy aircraft started turning and skidding. I fired first from 400 yards with 60 degrees deflection and then manoeuvred into a position directly behind the Me 109, closing to 20 ft, and fired. The enemy aircraft, hit in the wings and fuselage, crashed into the ground.'

With these four kills Harry Parker's score now stood at eight, making him the 'Clan's' newest ace. Such was the level of combat that day two more pilots from the 325th also achieved this much sought after status later in the mission. The first of these individuals was Lt Ben Emmert when he destroyed three Bf 109s. He reported;

'I climbed to attack 40 enemy aircraft at 27,000 ft and overtook a Me 109 that broke into a tight Lufbery with the rest of the enemy aeroplanes. I started firing from 300 yards astern, closing to 75 yards, and observed many hits on the wings and fuselage, which started burning as the enemy aeroplane lost height. Lt Walker saw the fighter hit the ground and explode. I then went after another Me 109 at 10,000 ft, firing at it from 200 yards at 20 degrees deflection. I saw many hits about the cockpit of the enemy aircraft, and the pilot bailed out as his aeroplane started burning at about 1200 ft. I then climbed to 1500 ft and turned into a third Me 109. I pulled up astern of the enemy aircraft and opened fire at 250 yards with 20 degrees of deflection, then closed to 100 yards and fired again with ten degrees of deflection. I saw a few hits on the fuselage of the Me 109, which split-essed at 1000 ft and crashed into the ground.'



Lt Phil Crookham and very casually dressed ace Lt Ben Emmert pose for the camera at Lesina during the summer of 1944. Lt Emmert reached acedom when he downed three Bf 109s and damaged five others on 31 July 1944, boosting his overall tally to six destroyed, one probable and five damaged. He was in turn downed by flak on 1 September 1944, spending the rest of the war as a PoW (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth)



Eight-victory ace Lt Phillip Sangermano and his crew chief pose with their P-51C 42-103581 Mary Norris at Lesina. Sangermano succumbed to wounds after being shot down during a local test flight in P-51C 42-103410 on 9 December 1944 (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

Lt Johnson confirmed Emmert's second and third victories, taking his overall tally to six.

The third pilot to reach ace status on this mission was Lt Phillip Sangermano, who also chipped in with three victories. He reported;

'I led my flight down and attacked approximately 35 Me 109s and FW 190s that were at about 20,000 ft. I closed astern and above one of the Me 109s and it tried to turn inside of me. He was unsuccessful in this manoeuvre and I pulled up to within 150 yards of him, firing at 15 degrees deflection and closing to 50 yards. The Me 109 was badly hit in the cockpit and wings and started to burn. It started down and crashed into the ground.

'After destroying this Me 109 I turned into a second one. The enemy aircraft tried to evade by wildly turning in all directions, but I stayed right with him and opened fire from 150 yards with 45 degrees deflection. Then I moved in to within 25 ft of the Bf 109 and fired. I saw many hits in the cockpit area of the enemy aircraft and it went into an immediate spin and crashed. I then encountered a third Me 109 at 5000 ft, out-turned him and closed from above and astern, firing from 150 yards down to 50 yards. I saw many hits on the fuselage and cockpit before the Me 109 went into a spin and crashed.'

The 'Clan's' newest ace now had six kills to his name. Three other pilots from the group scored doubles during this 'turkey shoot' – Lts John Reynolds, William Pomerantz and V A Woodman. The remaining victories were scored by Lt Henry Southern and Flt Off Wesley Terry. All in all the 'Clan's' score for the day was 18 kills, one probable and 12 damaged.

After a milk run to Avignon, in France, on 2 August the 325th headed to Germany the following day when it escorted B-24s heading to Friedrichshafen to bomb Dornier's Manzell aircraft factory. Shortly after the bombers hit the target three Bf 109s were engaged and one of them was shot down by future ace Lt John Simmons. He reported;

'I observed a Me 109 at 16,000 ft flying straight and level. Using the cloud cover for concealment I was able to surprise the enemy aircraft, and I came in from the rear at "six o'clock" and began firing at 500 yards, closing to 50 yards. Hits were observed to enter the cockpit and the left wing, and shortly afterwards the enemy aircraft exploded and spun in. Flt Off Victor Ames witnessed the combat and confirmed the victory.'

At about the same time as this combat was taking place other 325th Mustangs encountered 14 Bf 109s and 20 Fw 190s that had come up through the clouds and bounced the trailing group of bombers, shooting five of them down. A running battle over 50 miles duly ensued as the USAAF fighter pilots worked hard to keep the enemy aircraft from the surviving bombers, which according to the mission summary were not in proper formation. In doing so the 325th claimed nine more kills, including a Bf 109 for Lt Harry Parker for his ninth victory in ten days. Parker's kill was a quick one, as he stated in his report;

'I attacked three Me 109s at 24,000 ft, singling out one of them, who saw me and dived away. I followed and fired from 300 yards to 150 yards, and saw many hits on the left wing and fuselage of the enemy aircraft. The Me 109 began burning and the pilot bailed out.'

Another Bf 109 was blown out of the air by Lt Robert H Brown for his fifth victory, making him the 'Clan's' latest ace. Brown reported;

'I attacked a Me 109 that was in a steep climb at 12,000 ft. At that point the enemy pilot saw me and turned sharply, but I fired from 200 yards with 60 degrees deflection, before moving in directly astern of him. I closed to about 20 ft, fired a burst and saw hits on the tail and wing of the enemy aircraft, which split-essed and crashed into the side of a mountain.'

The top scorer for the day was Lt Col J V Toner who downed two of the Fw 190s, while four other Focke-Wulfs were destroyed by Lt Col E H Beverly and Lts J R Bond, E T Strauss and H R Loftus. The remaining kill – a Bf 109 – was credited to Lt A J Fitch. All 325th FG Mustangs returned safely to base.

The 'Clan' headed to France again on 6 August, and it was an uneventful mission with only two Fw 190s seen – they immediately fled upon spotting the P-51s. Oil targets in Germany were attacked the following day when the 325th escorted bombers striking production facilities in Blechhammer. This time the Luftwaffe showed up, with 14 aircraft being encountered in the target area – 13 Bf 109s and a He 111(!). Two engagements followed, allowing three aces to add to their scores and one near ace to get closer to his goal.

In the first clash five Bf 109s attempted to bounce the bombers just as they left the target area, but they dived away when the Mustang pilots challenged them. Lt Paul Tatman shot one of them down in flames at 1110 hrs. Thirty minutes later eight more Bf 109s attempted a pass at the bombers but they too were intercepted and split-essed away. Two of them were attacked and destroyed at 1140 hrs by Lt Henry Wolfe and ace Capt Richard Dunkin, who scored his seventh victory. He reported;

'I saw a group of enemy fighters getting ready to bounce the bombers. Diving from 28,000 ft, I came in behind one of the Me 109s and started firing from "six o'clock", observing many hits on the fuselage. I continued to fire in a turning fight and closed to 150 ft, seeing parts come off of the enemy aircraft. Shortly afterwards I saw it emitting smoke and the propeller wind-milling. The pilot jettisoned his canopy, rolled over and bailed out, but his 'chute did not open.'

P-51D *My Gal Sal*, with Lt Wayne Lowry at the controls, taxis out at Lesina at the start of another mission in August 1944 (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)



Ten minutes later ace Lt Wayne Lowry and near ace Lt Barrie Davis chose their victims, and two more Bf 109s met their fate. Lt Lowry's encounter report read as follows;

'I was a section leader on an escort mission to Blechhammer when I observed eight enemy aircraft preparing to attack the Allied bombers from "five o'clock low". I executed a 90-degree turn and closed on the extreme right Me 109, closing to 800 ft and firing a short burst. I continued firing from 500 ft dead astern. Hits were observed in the fuselage, around the cockpit and in the engine as the enemy aircraft went into a spin and the pilot bailed out.

Lt Davis noted in his report;

'Leading my section on an escort mission to Blechhammer, I saw eight Me 109s 5000 ft below me preparing to attack our bombers. Executing a diving turn, I led my flight down to 20,000 ft and closed on the No 2 positioned enemy aircraft in the leading flight. I fired a short burst from "six o'clock" with no apparent results. I continued firing short bursts as I closed in from dead astern, and from 100 yards I saw hits in the fuselage near the base of the wings. Coolant began pouring from the Me 109, followed by a stream of smoke as the enemy aircraft went into a steep dive and exploded as it hit the ground.'

Lt Lowry's victory was his 11th, and last, victory, and it was Lt Davis' fourth. The last victory of the day was claimed by future ace Lt John Simmons, who downed the He 111 for his fourth victory.

No enemy aircraft were encountered on the mission of 9 August and only one showed up during an escort mission to Ploesti the following day. This was quickly despatched by Capt Richard Dunkin;

'On an escort mission to Ploesti, and after leaving the bombers, I noticed a lone Me 109 at 15,000 ft making a pass at a forward flight of P-51s. I dove after the Me 109 and closed in, starting firing from "six o'clock" from 300 yards and closing again to 225 yards and firing again. I saw many strikes on the fuselage and followed the Me 109 down to 1000 ft, where I watched the enemy aircraft split-S and head for the ground. A faulty 'chute was seen trailing the Me 109, and I believe the enemy pilot, when jumping, fell out of his 'chute.'

Over the next several days the 'Clan' flew softening up missions in southern France in preparation for the upcoming invasion. On some of these missions the 325th FG attacked heavy gun emplacements and radar stations in the planned invasion area, and on others escorted B-24s bombing German positions in the area. The 'Clan's' final mission in support of Operation *Dragoon* (the invasion of southern France) was to escort transport aircraft and gliders carrying paratroopers to Draguignan, France.

On 17 August the group flew the first of three straight missions to Ploesti, and to the surprise of all participants met no opposition from German or Rumanian aircraft. Three days later the 325th escorted B-24s to oil facilities in Poland, and again the Axis air forces were nowhere to be seen. The enemy continued to be absent in the air when the 'Clan' escorted bombers attacking Hajdúböszörmény airfield in Hungary on 21 August. On this occasion, since the enemy would not come up, the 325th went down and thoroughly strafed the airfield, claiming 37 enemy aircraft destroyed, 13 probably destroyed and 17 damaged.

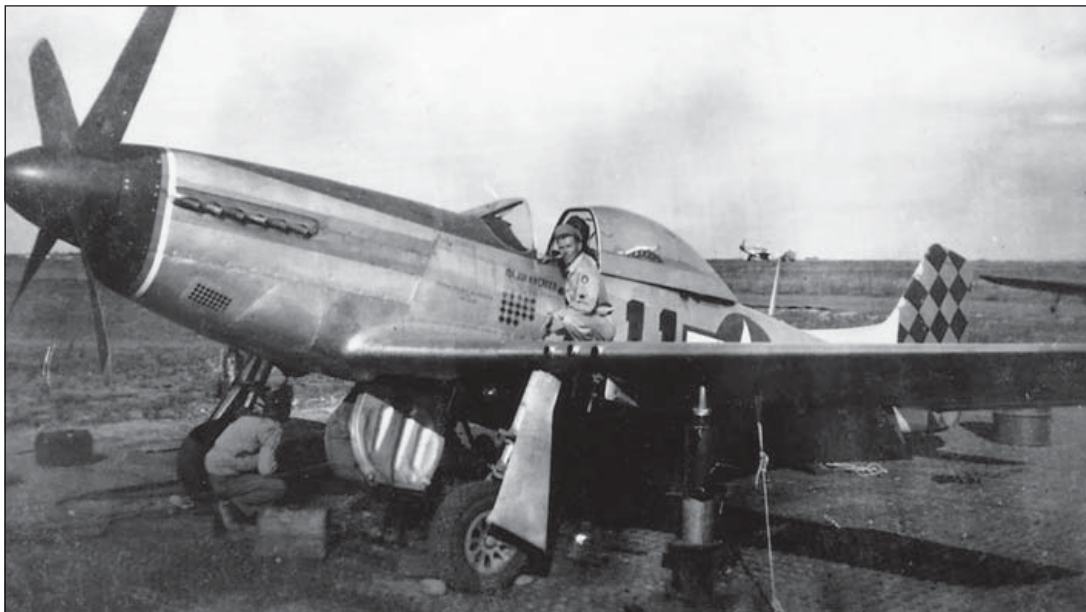
Having thoroughly worked over the target area, Lt Robert Brown noticed a Bf 109 at 11,000 ft and after a brief chase shot it down for his sixth victory.

As the B-17s began their return to base after attacking the oil refinery in Edertal, Germany, on 22 August, Axis fighters began attacking some of the straggling Fortresses. The enemy aircraft were in turn bounced by pilots from the 325th, and after a series of dogfights four German fighters fell to earth. Lt Barrie Davis bagged two of them for his fifth and sixth victories, making him an ace. He reported the action as follows;

'I was escorting a B-24 straggler home when I heard a call for help from a B-17. I turned 180 degrees and headed north. About 15 miles west of Lake Balaton I saw six FW 190s making attacks on a B-17 at 17,000 ft. Just as I arrived at the scene the bomber went down in flames. I quickly bounced the enemy aircraft, firing several short bursts at two of them and then tacking onto a third FW 190. I fired short bursts from 300 yards down to 50 yards, dead astern, and saw many strikes around the cockpit area of the fuselage. The enemy pilot went into a spin at 12,000 ft and I followed him down to 1000 ft, where I was forced to break off because of the FW 190 following me down. Lt John Conant saw the enemy aircraft crash and confirmed my claim.

'I then heard bombers calling for help over Lake Balaton, and after turning north I observed six Me 109s making passes at a B-17 and a B-24, which were both straggling. As I approached the Me 109s scattered, and I followed one of them down to 3000 ft before breaking off my attack and heading back to the bombers. At this time I saw another Me 109 on my tail so I broke left. After three or four turns I closed in on the enemy aircraft from "six o'clock" and opened fire from 300 yards. Hits were scored on the fuselage as the Me 109 rolled and headed for the deck. I followed him and fired short bursts from dead astern. Smoke began streaming from the Me 109 as a result of many hits in the fuselage and the pilot bailed out at 2000 ft.'

Maj Herschel Green's P-51D 44-13498 is seen at Lesina in late August 1944 with its full victory tally of 18 kills under the canopy and a newly added fin strake (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)



P-51C 42-103581, seen at Lesina during the summer of 1944, was assigned to Lt Phil Sangermano. He scored five of his eight victories in this machine (*Dwayne Tabatt via Tom Ivie*)



The remaining kills, both Bf 109s, were credited to Lts William Hinton and Larry Ritter. One P-51 was lost due to mechanical failure, but Lt James Lintz was able to bail out successfully over enemy territory.

A major air battle took place on 23 August during the 'Clan's' escort mission to Markersdorf airfield in Austria. Eighteen of the group's Mustangs stayed with the bombers over the target while 31 others engaged in a big dogfight with a mixed bag of 45 Bf 109s and Fw 190s. The enemy aircraft had been spotted at 'nine o'clock' to the bombers when the formation was about 20 miles southwest of Wiener-Neustadt, and Maj 'Herky' Green immediately led his 317th FS down to attack the Axis fighters. Four Fw 190s and a Bf 109 were destroyed during the encounter, one of the Focke-Wulfs providing Maj Green with his 18th, and final, victory;

'Upon hearing distress calls from the bombers I led my squadron in a diving turn to the right, passed under the bombers and attacked the enemy aircraft from "six o'clock". I picked out a FW 190 and opened fire from 300 yards down to 175 yards. The FW 190 took a barrage of hits in the fuselage around the cockpit and then a small explosion occurred. The enemy aircraft made a right turn at 22,000 ft, then split-essed and the pilot bailed out after a second explosion shook his FW 190.'

Lt Harry Parker continued his fast paced assault on the Luftwaffe by downing a Fw 190 for his tenth victory, the double ace reporting;

'I attacked a FW 190 at 25,000 ft and the enemy aircraft dove into the clouds and I followed. I overtook the FW 190 at 20,000 ft and opened fire from 300 yards and six degrees deflection and closed to 150 yards with no deflection. I got many hits in the tail and fuselage of the FW 190 and the pilot bailed out as his aeroplane went down smoking badly.'

Lt John M Simmons of the 317th FS, seated in his P-51B 42-106891. He finished the war with a total of seven victories to his name (*Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth*)





Lt Phillip Sangermano raised his total to eight by downing two Fw 190s in short order, the ace describing his victories as follows;

'I attacked a FW 190 that had just made a pass at the bombers. The enemy aircraft started spiralling down at a steep angle, and I overtook him at 15,000 ft and commenced firing from 250 yards with 15-45 degrees deflection. I then closed to within 50 yards dead astern and fired. I observed many hits in the wings, engine and cockpit of the FW 190, which exploded and went down enveloped in flames. After destroying this FW 190 I attacked a second FW 190 at 500 ft. The enemy aircraft attempted to evade by turning sharply but I followed, firing from astern with 15-45 degrees deflection and closing to 75 ft with no deflection. I saw many hits in the cockpit of the FW 190, which crashed into the ground and burned.'

Lt John Simmons also downed two Fw 190s during the melee to raise his total to six, and thus become the 'Clan's' latest ace. His first kill came after he observed 15 Fw 190s attacking the rearmost box of bombers. Diving to break up the enemy formation, Simmons made a pass at the gaggle of Focke-Wulfs and then picked out one of them, which he shot down at a height of 5000 ft. After this victory Simmons climbed back up to 10,000 ft and then spotted two more Fw 190s flying on the deck. Diving after them, he closed on the trailing fighter until the two machines split-essed. Simmons followed the leader, opening fire at 1000 ft and closing to within 50 ft of his quarry, at which time the Fw 190 burst into flames and crashed into the side of a mountain.

Seven other Fw 190s were destroyed by Maj J E Peery, Capt S W Farnham, Lts J Bond, W Pomerantz and L Schacheur and Flt Offs F G Johnson and W D Terry. Lts Woodman and Bass closed out the scoring with a Bf 109 apiece. A total of 15 enemy aircraft had gone down under the guns of the 'Clan' for the loss of Lt Donald Hawkins.

Aerial action continued on 24 August when the 325th escorted a raid on oil refineries in the Czech city of Pardubice. The USAAF formation

Capt Richard Dunkin of the 317th FS flew P-51D 44-13336 during his second tour of duty with the 'Checkertail Clan' and scored three victories in it to raise his final tally to nine destroyed and one probable (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

endured very heavy flak as it approached the target, and two P-51s were hit. Both were able to return to base, however, as was a third Mustang crippled by mechanical failure. Over the target area a Bf 109 made a diving attack on the bombers. It was followed down by Capt Richard Dunkin, who reported;

'I was leading my section over the target area when I observed a single Me 109 making a pass at the B-24s. I was at 29,000 ft when I made a diving turn and chased the enemy aircraft to the deck. The Me 109 made a gentle turn to the left, then straightened out as I closed from 275 yards to 150 yards and fired several short bursts from dead astern. I observed strikes in the cockpit as the pilot jettisoned the canopy and the aeroplane crashed into the ground.'

This was Lt Dunkin's ninth, and final, victory.

Moments later a force of 20 Bf 109s and 20 Fw 190s bounced the bombers and shot down seven of them before the 'Clan' could intervene. Additionally, several pilots from the 325th FG reported seeing a captured P-51, painted black with yellow wing stripes, flying with the German fighters. Stung into action by the falling bombers, the 'Clan' bounced the German formations and exacted a small measure of revenge by downing three fighters. Lt Harry Parker reported;

'I attacked a Me 109 at 15,000 ft and fired a short burst from 300 yards, before turning away after my guns quit working. The pilot of the Me 109, however, rolled over and bailed out. My wingman, Lt Gaston, observed the action and confirmed my victory.'

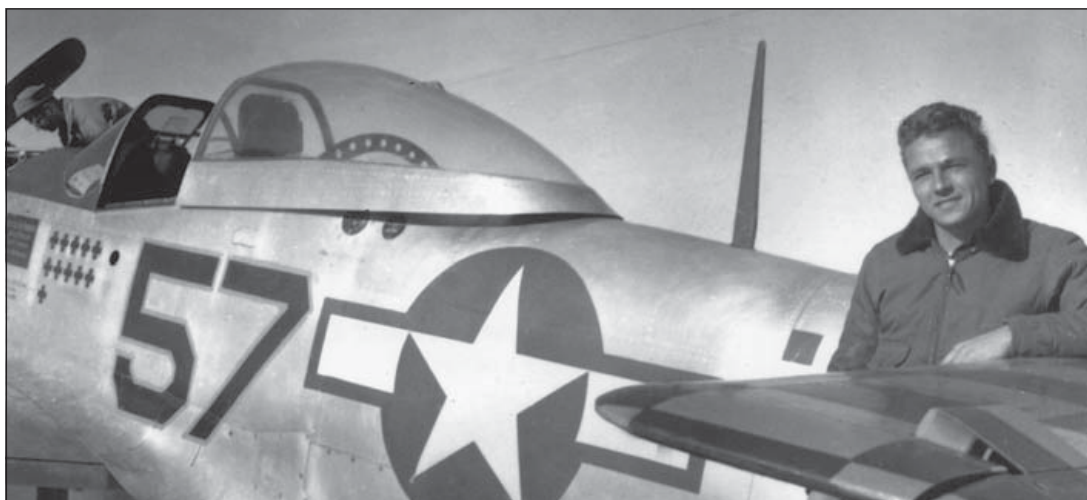
With his 11th kill Harry Parker had now tied with Wayne Lowry as the second-highest scorer in the 325th FG.

Another of the 'Clan's' aces, Lt Robert H Brown, clobbered a Fw 190 for his seventh, and final, kill;

'I attacked a FW 190 at 15,000 ft and he dived away, but I caught up with him at 10,000 ft. I opened fire from 100 yards astern with 40 degrees deflection and closed to 20 ft with no deflection. Many hits were observed on the wings and fuselage of the FW 190 and it burst into flames and crashed into the ground.'

The remaining victory of the day was recorded by Lt P H Whipperfurth.

Lt Harry Parker of the 318th FS poses with his P-51D 44-13430 at Lesina after downing a Bf 109 on 24 August 1944 for his 11th victory. He had claimed his tenth (a Fw 190 near Bruck, in Austria) with this Mustang 24 hours earlier (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth)



WHERE IS THE LUFTWAFFE?

After the mission of 24 August the Luftwaffe seemed to vanish from the skies. Indeed, between 25 and 29 August not one enemy aeroplane was seen during escort missions that travelled to Czechoslovakia, Rumania, Austria and Germany. On 31 August the 325th returned to Ploesti when it escorted B-17s that were not carrying bombs, but were instead flying a mission of mercy. Soviet troops had overrun the area and numerous American PoWs had been freed from their Rumanian camps and would now be flown back to Italy in the B-17s. More than 1000 Allied airmen were successfully evacuated during the course of the day.

With the continued absence of the Axis air forces in the sky the 'Clan' received orders to carry out a strafing attack on Debreczen airfield in Hungary on 1 September. The plan called for 11 Mustangs to fly cover for the strafing P-51s, which would attack the airfield from three different directions. The first section would hit the target from west to east, the second section from north to south and the third section from east to west. The three-pronged attack was a complete success, with the 'Clan' destroying 59 aircraft, several transports and four locomotives at the cost of two Mustangs and their pilots. One of the lost airmen was ace Lt Benjamin Emmert, who was downed by flak after destroying five aircraft on the ground. He managed to bail out and became a PoW. The other loss was Lt. Lowell Steere.

The strafing was not the day's only action, as Lt Col Ernest Beverly shot a Me 410 down and Lts Bruce Cobb and David Schmerbeck combined to destroy three Ju 52/3ms. Two of the tri-motor transports were credited to Lt Schmerbeck.

Strafing was also the order of the day on 2 September after the 325th was released from its escort duties in Yugoslavia. Railways became the 'Clan's' target, with pilots strafing the marshalling yards at Nis. The group returned to Yugoslavia the following day, and again it targeted rail traffic between Nis and Belgrade. From 1350 hrs to 1500 hrs 37 of the 'Clan's' Mustangs strafed rail targets and achieved the following results – 13 locomotives destroyed and 25 damaged; 12 freight wagons destroyed and 73 damaged; ten oil wagons destroyed and 15 damaged; 12 trucks destroyed and six damaged; two armoured vehicles destroyed; two coal wagons destroyed and 15 damaged; eight flat wagons with 15 motor vehicles damaged; one house damaged; one railway repair workshop damaged. After the strafing attack was completed Lt Don Terry caught a lone Ju 52/3m in the air and promptly shot it down.

On 4 and 5 September the 'Clan' escorted bombers striking railway infrastructure in Italy and Hungary, and destroyed one more enemy aircraft and several other targets during a strafing run on Bački Brestovac

airfield in Yugoslavia. After an uneventful escort mission on 6 September, the group took off for another strafing raid two days later. The target on this occasion was Ecke airfield, again in Yugoslavia. From 1000 hrs 35 of the 'Clan's' Mustangs made between five and eight passes on the deck from the south to the north. The strafing attack destroyed 22 Ju 52/3ms, seven Fw 190s, four Fi 156s, 19 Ju 88s, two Me 210s and a single Bf 109, Hs 126, Bf 110 and Hs 129. One section from the 325th also made a pass at nearby Petrovgrad airfield, where three Ju 52/3ms were destroyed. One P-51 was lost, Flt Off Thomas Rogers last being seen on the first pass over Ecke when his aeroplane pulled up at 500 ft trailing smoke.

A later photo-reconnaissance sortie over Ecke confirmed that all the aircraft on the airfield had indeed been destroyed. Brig Gen Dean Strother, Commanding General of Fifteenth Fighter Command, stated that 'This is the most thoroughly effective strafing attack I have ever known in terms of the completeness of the destruction accomplished'.

The Luftwaffe was still staying on the ground when the 'Clan' escorted bombers to Lobau and Schwechat oil refineries in Austria on 10 September, so one of the 325th's sections looked for targets on the ground during the trip back to Lesina. Me 410s were observed on the airfield at Papa, and after a strafing run nine of them were left in flames.

These recent strafing runs dramatically boosted the 325th FG's score of enemy aircraft destroyed, but unfortunately for the pilots involved these victories did not count towards acedom as was the case in the Eighth Air Force. Nevertheless, they would continue risking their lives by flying these dangerous missions, which further reduced Germany's ability to defend itself against the oncoming Allied forces.

11 September saw a change of command at Lesina when Lt Col Ernest Beverly replaced Lt Col 'Chet' Sluder as CO of the 325th FG – no missions were flown that day. The next two missions were uneventful, but when the 'Clan' travelled to Greece on 15 September two German aircraft were actually seen in the air. The Ju 52/3ms were spotted circling above Megara airfield, and Lts Art Fiedler and John Simmons wasted no time in shooting the 'sitting ducks' down. Lt Simmons reported;

'I was flying over Megara airdrome, in Greece, at 14,000 ft when I saw two Ju 52s in the traffic pattern at "one o'clock". I executed a 180-degree turn and closed on the leading Ju 52 from "seven o'clock". I opened fire

P-51D 44-13322 *Devastating Dottie*/ *Miss Janie VIII* was flown by Lt John Simmons, and it is seen here displaying its pilot's final score of seven confirmed kills. Simmons' seventh, and final, victory was a Ju 52/3m that he shot down over Megara airfield, in Greece, on 11 September 1944 (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)



with a series of short bursts from 1000 ft down to 50 ft and scored hits on the left wing base and front section of the fuselage. The enemy aircraft exploded as I broke away from my attack, then hit the ground enveloped in flames.'

This was John Simmons seventh, and final, victory with the 325th FG. 'Art' Fiedler then took over and blasted the other Ju 52/3m out of the sky for his sixth victory.

While these attacks were taking place two flights of 'Clan' fighters strafed Megara and Eleusis airfields, destroying eight enemy aircraft and damaging four others. Strafing claimed another of the group's pilots when Lt John Lynch's Mustang was hit by flak and he crashed on Eleusis airfield.

During the remainder of September the 'Clan' flew 12 more missions and the Luftwaffe was nowhere to be seen. Two P-51s and their pilots, Lts R A Trautt and G N Strait, went missing probably due to weather over Hungary on 21 September. During early October the Luftwaffe was still absent from the skies, but on the 4th the 325th lost another of its aces when Lt Wayne Lowry was forced to bail out due to mechanical problems on a mission to Munich. He too became a PoW.

Finally, on 12 October, the pilots of the 'Clan' got to fire their guns again during a strafing mission to Budapest and Vienna. The primary targets of the day were railways and their rolling stock, the 'Clan's' pilots claiming 33 steam locomotives, one electric locomotive, eight trucks, two civilian vehicles, 20 oil wagons, one powerplant and one oil barge destroyed, before turning their attention to airfields. Four P-51s strafed Csákvár airfield, destroying five Ju 52/3ms, one Ju 88, one He 111 and two unidentified twin-engined aircraft. A further two Ju 52/3ms and four

A smiling 'Art' Fiedler poses with his Mustang *Helen* after destroying a He 111 on 12 October 1944 for his seventh victory. He finished the war with a total of eight kills and one probable – four of the victories were scored while flying this aircraft (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth)



Go 242 gliders were damaged. Four other Mustangs strafed Győr airfield, destroying four Ju 52/3ms (and damaging two more), a Fi 156 and a Ju 88. Meanwhile, Lt 'Art' Fiedler reported;

'While on a strafing mission between Budapest and Vienna I observed a He 111 at "seven o'clock" at approximately 1000 ft. I closed to about 300 yards and decided to pull out to the side so that I could further identify the enemy aircraft. When the He 111 started firing I turned into it and fired from 75 yards. Many hits were seen to enter the wings, motors and cockpit of the enemy aircraft. At this time the He 111 began burning and started down in a left turn. As I followed it down I fired a few bursts and saw parts flying off of the enemy plane. The burning enemy aircraft continued on down and crashed and exploded.'

Lt Fiedler had just scored his seventh victory. The action in the air did not end with Lt Fiedler's kill, as Lt J V Heimback found and shot down another He 111. Lts H L Long and C C Whitmire closed out the day's scoring by destroying a Fi 156 and an unidentified twin-engined aircraft, respectively.

13 October found the 325th FG escorting B-17s that were attacking the oil refineries at Blechhammer. Again, no aerial opposition was met, and after they were released from close escort the 'Clan' pilots turned their attention to targets on the ground. Two P-51s strafed Csákvár airfield, destroying a pair of Ju 52/3ms, a Fw 189 and an unidentified twin-engined aircraft. All of the Mustangs returned safely to Lesina. The 'Clan' returned to Blechhammer the following day, hitting rail targets on the way home – six locomotives and three oil wagons were destroyed, but at the cost of one Mustang and its pilot, Lt J Houghton.

The group's missions on 16 October were two-fold. One was to provide fighter escort for a 'cloak and dagger' operation involving a PBY carrying British agents whose job it was to foment unrest and encourage sabotage against the German occupiers of Greece, while the second mission was a standard escort to Brux, in Czechoslovakia.

In total contrast to what 'Clan' pilots had been experiencing in recent weeks, 48 enemy aircraft were encountered between Brux and Dresden. A single flight of four Mustangs intercepted the attacking fighters. Leading the USAAF machines was Lt Sheldon K Anderson, who had yet to engage the Luftwaffe in aerial combat despite this being his 31st mission. Anderson's story was related by the 'Clan's' public relations officer;

'Anderson and his wingman, Lt Vernon Kahl, swooped down for positive identification. About half of the enemy formation saw them, dropped their tanks and started to climb. Five minutes later, the youthful flyer who had not done too well in pilot training (by his own admission) had shot down five enemy aeroplanes. Number one – "My wingman and I hit the tail-end flight of the box. The one I went after blew up right in front of my prop".

'The speed of their dive carried them through to the next flight. Number two – "Again I thought I was going to hit him, but the explosion of his aeroplane came just in time. I flew right through the smoke of his explosion".

'Number three – "The formation was scattering out now, but we still had enough speed to keep going after them. The one I got this time seemed to fall apart, there was no explosion".

‘Number four – “I went in and got on one’s tail. I chased him around a couple of turns, firing all the time. He began to smoke and started going down”. The second of two enemies who sought to ambush Anderson was now on his tail, “so I cut the throttle and slowed down”.

‘Number five – Anderson suddenly twisted his Mustang to the left and then he was on the enemy’s tail. He started firing as soon as he came in range. “Only one gun was working. It sounded like a B-B. All of a sudden the Jerry aeroplane went limp, like a rag, as if it didn’t have a pilot. It went into a stall and headed down”. After that Anderson really did get started for home.’

After a review of his claims Lt Anderson was officially credited with three destroyed (two Bf 109s and one Fw 190) and two probables. His wingman, Lt Kahl destroyed one Fw 190 and probably destroyed a Bf 109. Lt L D Voss closed out the day’s scoring by destroying two Bf 109s. No losses were incurred by the 325th FG.

The next four missions – two bomber escorts, one C-47 escort and the escort of a reconnaissance Mosquito – were performed without incident. The periodic escort of reconnaissance F-5 Lightnings or Mosquitos, which started at around this time, came about following the appearance of the Me 262 jet fighter. Prior to its arrival on the scene, the unarmed reconnaissance aircraft, flying at high speed at a very high altitude, had been able to perform their missions without interference.

In an effort to again take the fight to the enemy the ‘Clan’, on 21 October, headed out for a far-ranging strafing mission that would cover territory between Vienna and Budapest. The targets were the airfields at Szombathely and Seregélyes and rail traffic in the area. The results of this mission were quite spectacular, with 37 enemy aircraft, six locomotives and four tank wagons being destroyed and 20 enemy aircraft, one locomotive and two freight wagons being damaged. In addition to the strafing claims, Lt John Gaia found a Ju 88 in the air;

‘While on a strafing mission to Szombathely airdrome I observed a Ju 88 ten miles northeast of the target, coming head-on at me at “nine o’clock” at about 1500 ft. I made a diving turn and came in dead astern of the enemy aircraft. I opened fire at 400 yards and closed to 50 yards. Hits were seen in the cockpit, fuselage and left engine of the enemy aircraft. At this time the left engine caught fire and the enemy aircraft went into a shallow dive. Other members of the flight got hits on the fuselage and right

Lt Oscar ‘Ockie’ Rau’s big day occurred on 5 November 1944 when he led his flight into an attack on eight Bf 109s near Lake Balaton. When the skirmish was over 20 minutes later six of the Messerschmitts had been downed, four of them by Lt Rau (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)





Lt Rau scored his four kills on 5 November 1944 in his P-51B 43-6861 *Funnyface* (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

When Maj Norman McDonald joined the 325th FG's 318th FS as its new CO in October 1944 he was already an ace with 7.5 victories to his name following a tour of duty with the 52nd FG in 1942-43. He destroyed four more enemy aircraft during his second tour, giving McDonald a total of 11.5 victories, two probable and four damaged (Tom Ivie collection)

northeast at the south edge of Lake Balaton, and Lt Oscar Rau and his flight went after them. By the time this brief, one-sided clash was over Lt Rau had personally downed four of the Bf 109s. He reported;

'I saw three Me 109s flying on the deck and dived down to attack the rear enemy aircraft, opening fire at 250 yards with 20 degrees deflection. Closing to 200 yards, I saw many hits on the wings and fuselage. The Me 109 burst into flames and the right wing fell off, the fighter crashing to the ground. I then pulled up behind another Me 109 and opened fire at 250 yards, closing to 200 yards where I saw numerous hits on the fuselage. The Me 109 immediately pulled up to 800 ft, where the pilot bailed out.



engine. Shortly afterwards the enemy aircraft crashed and burst into flames.'

Lt Gaia was given full credit for the victory.

One pilot, Lt F Johnson, had to bail out after his Mustang was hit by small arms fire whilst strafing. He was seen to have landed safely on the ground.

Between 23 October and 4 November the 'Clan' flew four escort missions, and again the Luftwaffe was not interested in engaging the bomber formations. However, on 5 November, during an escort to Vienna, the 325th finally engaged a small and reluctant force of eight Bf 109s and shot down six of them. The enemy aircraft were spotted flying

'I next saw a Me 109 trying to pull in behind my wingman. I made a very tight turn and fired a short burst from 90 degrees deflection at the Me 109. My burst missed the enemy aircraft, but in his attempt to evade he tried making a very tight turn and spun into the ground and burst into flames.

'After this Me 109 crashed I was flying at 100 ft when I spotted two Me 109s attempting to land. I chose my target and told my wingman to attack the other enemy aircraft. I closed to 200 yards and opened fire, then closed to 150 yards and saw my gunfire score many hits on the fuselage and cockpit.

The enemy aircraft immediately spun into the ground, where it burst into flames.'

The second of these Bf 109s went down shortly thereafter, having been hit by gunfire from Lt Robert Newell's Mustang.

The sixth kill of the day was scored by Maj Norman McDonald who had recently transferred to the 325th FG from the 52nd FG to take command of the 318th FS. McDonald, who was already an ace with 7.5 victories, downed a Bf 109.

Two missions were flown on 6 November. The first was undertaken by the 318th, which escorted B-24s sent to attack troop movements in Yugoslavia. The Mustang pilots then turned their attention to targets on the ground, four passes being made on motor transport on the road between Mitrovica and Donje Stanovce – 19 trucks were destroyed. Rail targets were also struck, with one locomotive being destroyed and four wagons damaged. During the second mission aircraft from all three squadrons escorted B-24s attacking an ordnance plant in Vienna. A solitary Fw 190 was encountered and shot down, its demise being credited to Lt J E Fehsenfeld. However, the Mustang piloted by Lt A K Rebb was lost due to unknown reasons.

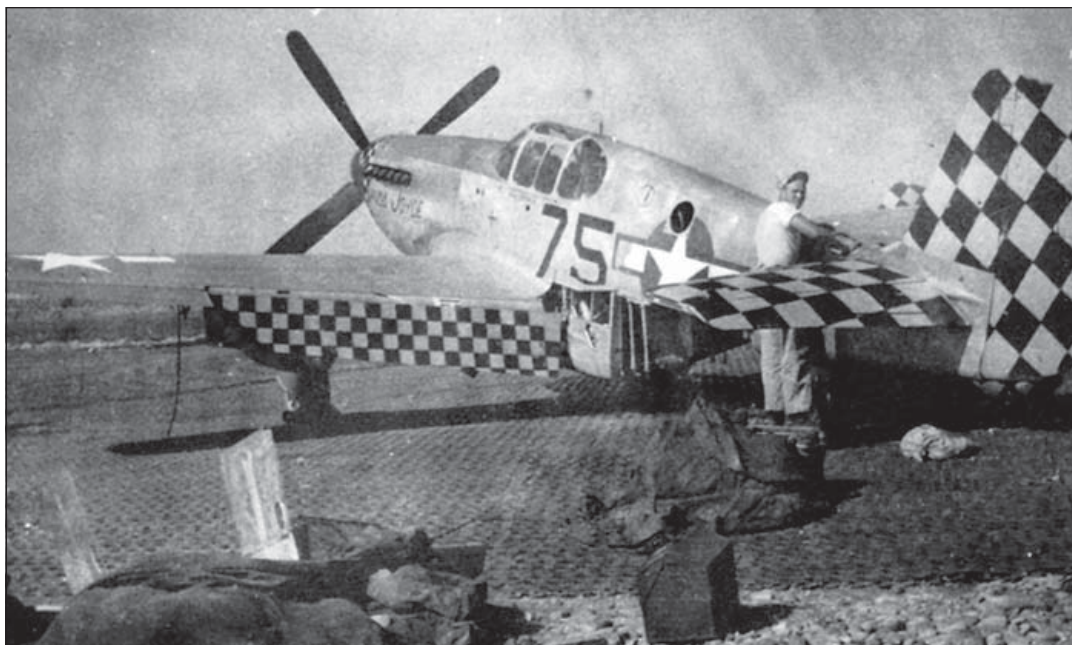
Worsening weather was now beginning to have an adverse effect on the group's mission effectiveness. For example, on 11 November, 14 of the 'Clan's' Mustangs were forced to land at various friendly bases in Italy because of weather-related issues on the return trip from Brux. One week later, on the 18th, the Mustangs flown by Lts R A Fischer and R D Dowiatt crashed in the vicinity of Lesina due to poor visibility caused by thick cloud.

Neither the weather nor the Luftwaffe caused the group any issues during a run of seven bomber escort missions in mid November. Finally, on 21 November, in a change of pace, the 'Clan' returned to strafing. It was tasked with patrolling the road between the Yugoslavian towns of Prijepolje and Rogatica, as well as nearby rail facilities, and destroy any moving targets the group encountered. During 45 minutes of strafing the 325th destroyed 51 trucks, a locomotive, three staff cars, three ammunition trucks, a German jeep and 12 horse-drawn carts. It also killed 49 German soldiers. In addition to these claims, another 23 trucks, ten flat cars and six horse-drawn carts were damaged. Two Mustangs were downed by flak during the strafing runs, but both pilots, Lts D C Haertel and C C Whitmire, were seen to bail out and land safely.

Several of the missions flown in late November and in the first few days of December saw Mustangs escorting reconnaissance aircraft over enemy territory. During the third such operation, on 2 December, pilots from the 'Clan' encountered a Me 262 for the first time. The flight had arrived at a point about 50 miles north of Augsburg, in Germany, when a Me 262 flashed through the undercast. One of the P-51 pilots succeeded in hitting it with a few rounds as it shot on past in the direction of the F-5 Lightning that the group was protecting. The jet fired at the reconnaissance aircraft but missed. Its pilot then turned and made a head-on pass at the lead



Ace Lt Richard Deakins scored six victories – three in P-47s and three in P-51s – while serving with the 318th FS. He was killed in a flying accident in a P-47 on 24 November 1944 (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)



'Checkerboards' on the tail surfaces were not enough for Lt John Perry and his groundcrew. They duly decorated *Linda Joyce's* flaps with another display of the 'checkerboard' marking synonymous with the 325th FG, making this fighter one of the most colourful Mustangs in-theatre (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

P-51, flown by Lt Billy Hinton. Hinton was able to score a few more hits on the jet before the German pilot disengaged and headed east. Lt Hinton was officially credited with damaging the Me 262.

Twelve more uneventful missions were flown between 9 and 17 December. However, on the first mission of the 17th, when the 'Clan' escorted B-17s to Blechhammer, four Fw 190s were encountered south of the target. In an attempt to positively identify the 'bogies' a flight of Mustangs overran the Fw 190s, but fired at them before doing so – Lt C A Morey claimed a probable. The Fw 190s evaded the attack by diving to the deck. Soon after this encounter two Bf 109s were spotted, but they escaped by diving into the clouds. The Mustang of Lt L E Schackner failed to return, his aircraft last being seen headed south across Lake Balaton trailing black smoke.

Fifteen of the 'Clan's' next 20 missions were as escorts for reconnaissance aircraft, with the remaining five being in support of heavy bombers. As per usual the Luftwaffe failed to make an appearance. One P-51 was lost on a bomber escort mission on Christmas Day, although its pilot, Lt L R Merrifield, was returned safely to Lesina. The remaining three missions flown on 25 December were photo-reconnaissance escorts (one to Pilsen, in Czechoslovakia, and two to Munich), and all aircraft returned safely.

Three more missions were flown the following day, two of which were photo-reconnaissance escorts. The third operation was a bomber escort mission, which took the group to the oil refineries of Blechhammer once again. During the approach to the target one of the 'Clan's' Mustangs was hit by flak and had to be escorted back to base. Bombs were released at 1340 hrs, and some 20 minutes later, during the return trip home, Lt David Ambrose spotted a single Bf 109 below him;

'I was at 22,000 ft when I observed a Me 109 flying at 18,000 ft heading toward Linz and dived down to identify it. The enemy pilot firewalled his engine upon observing our P-51s and climbed to 24,000 ft. I closed in and



fired a short burst at a ten-degree deflection and saw many hits on the wing. The enemy pilot then split-essed and executed violent turns toward the deck, before levelling off at 10,000 ft. From dead astern I fired a long burst from 1000 ft to 500 ft and observed many hits in the fuselage around the cockpit. The enemy pilot then executed another split-S, levelled out at 3000 ft, jettisoned his canopy and went into a dive, his fighter bursting into flames as it hit the ground. Confirmed by Lt Hosford.'

Five minutes later Lt Fred Wulf claimed another kill;

'I was flying at 26,000 ft when I observed a Ju 88 ahead of me at about 24,000 ft. I attacked from 700 yards, at which point the enemy aircraft turned away and started to climb, firing back at me. I closed to 200 yards dead astern, fired again and observed many hits entering the wings, engines and fuselage. The Ju 88 rolled over, went into a spin and burst into flames. Lts Woodson and Margetts observed and confirmed the destruction of this enemy aircraft.'

The 'Clan' split its forces on 27 December to cover two different groups of bombers attacking the railway marshalling yards in Maribor, Yugoslavia. The bombing ripped the target apart, but again no Luftwaffe fighters rose to defend their territory against the Fifteenth Air Force. The next day the 'Clan' flew to Czechoslovakia to provide penetration escort for B-24s of the 304th Bomb Wing (BW) that were attacking targets in Kolin and Pardubice. The Mustangs were released from escort duty as soon as the bomb run had been completed, and 32 of the 325th's 51 fighters dived down to the decks to carry out strafing attacks on two airfields and numerous road and rail targets.

During 45 minutes of strafing the 'Clan' destroyed four Me 323s, a He 111, a Ju 52/3m, a Fw 190, 26 locomotives, one freight wagon and two vehicles. This success cost the group the P-51 of Lt W C Margetts, who failed to return from the mission.

1944 was then brought to a close with an escort mission to the Brenner Pass in northern Italy, where bombers of the 47th BW attacked bridges and rail targets, and a photo-reconnaissance escort for an aircraft covering future targets in Augsburg.

Mustangs of the 319th FS at rest at Lesina in late 1944. In the foreground is Lt Robert Storey's P-51D *Dottie* (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

SWANSONG OF THE LUFTWAFFE

The new year of 1945 began the same way as the old year had ended, with missions being limited by bad weather over Europe. Indeed, only eight missions were flown between 3 and 18 January, and Axis aircraft were not to be seen during bomber escort missions to northern Italy, Germany, Yugoslavia and Austria.

These missions were followed up on 19 January by a fighter sweep over Zagreb and Szombathely, and this time the 'Clan's' pilots found a number of enemy aircraft in the air. Six had been destroyed by the time the group headed for home. The action began when Lt David Ambrose bounced a Ju 52/3m and shot it down north of Zagreb at 1005 hrs. Ten minutes later Lt Robert Reid encountered another Junkers tri-motor southeast of Vienna;

'While participating in a fighter sweep in the Zagreb and Szombathely areas I covered my leader as he made a pass on a Ju 52 flying due east at an altitude of 1000 ft. Because of his excessive speed my leader overshot, and I closed on the enemy aircraft, opened fire with short bursts at 1000 ft and broke off at 500 ft. Direct hits were seen at the wing roots and in the front section of the fuselage as the enemy aircraft went into a spiral and crashed with the left wing enveloped in flames.'

The next German aircraft fell at 1025 hrs under the gunfire of future ace Lt Gordon H McDaniel, and he reported his first kill as follows;

'I was leading a section of eight P-51s at 1000 ft and observed a FW 190 at "five o'clock" at our altitude. I overtook the enemy aircraft, opened fired from 1000 ft with ten degrees deflection and scored many hits on the fuselage and tail. The tail of the FW 190 broke off and the enemy aircraft went straight down, crashing into the ground. Witnessed and confirmed by Lts Wulf, Anodro and Raymond.'

P-51D *Watch On The Rhine* was assigned to Lt Leland Stacey of the 317th FS, and he used it to claim the last of his three victories (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)



Ten minutes later at 1035 hrs, Lt Robert Reid claimed his second kill of the day, reporting;

'I was flying at 9000 ft and observed a Me 109 at "one o'clock", 8000 ft below me. I executed a diving turn and closed on the Me 109. I closed throttle, dropped flaps and fired a series of short bursts from 1500 ft to 800 ft from "six o'clock high". Direct hits were seen in the fuselage around the cockpit and the Me 109 dropped a wing and went directly into the ground. Capt Burr observed and confirmed.'

About 30 minutes later Lt Robert W Bean closed out the day's scoring when he shot down an enemy aircraft that he reported as a 'Me 309' (possibly a Fw 190D?). A P-51 was lost due to engine failure, although Lt D Aiken bailed out successfully.

The 325th returned to escort duty on 20 January when it travelled to Regensburg, in Germany. Three groups of B-17s targeted the city's oil storage facilities, and this time the 'Clan' met some resistance from the Luftwaffe. Forty Fw 190s were spotted by a flight from the 317th FS as they were attempting to attack the last box of B-17s. The flight, led by Capt 'Art' Fiedler, charged into the enemy formation, broke up the attack and destroyed four of the Fw 190s – one Mustang was lost in return. The first of the four kills was claimed by Capt 'Art' Fiedler, giving him his eighth, and final, victory of his tour of duty. Fiedler reported;

'While on an escort mission to Regensburg I observed 40 FW 190s just east of the target, approaching from a northeasterly direction at 34,000 ft. We were at 32,000 ft, and I led my flight in a climbing turn after them. I was able to get on the tail of two of the FW 190s and closed on the rearmost enemy aircraft. I opened fire at 200 yards from "seven o'clock". I continued closing to 50 yards and fired again. Many hits were seen to enter the bottom left side of the fuselage, and shortly thereafter the FW 190 burst into flames and exploded in the air.'

The leading scorer of the day, however, was one of the 'Clan's' younger pilots, Lt Edward L Miller, who shot down three Fw 190s;

'While escorting B-17s attacking Regensburg my flight observed 40 enemy aircraft attempting to attack the B-17s and we intercepted the FW 190s. The Germans went into a Lufbery at 33,000 ft and I closed on one of the FW 190s and fired a long burst with 20 down to 5 degrees deflection from 300 down to 150 yards. I saw many hits in the fuselage around the cockpit and base of the wings, and the FW 190 executed a snap roll and the pilot bailed out.

'After this encounter I observed another FW 190 on the tail of a P-51. I dove after the FW 190 and closed from "seven o'clock high", firing a long burst from 300 yards with 25 down to 10 degrees deflection. I saw hits on the base of the wings and the front section of the fuselage. The enemy aircraft executed a modified split-S, began burning and smoking profusely and was last seen spinning into an overcast at 10,000 ft. I then saw an enemy aircraft below the Lufbery and pursued it, opening fire at 400 yards, closing to 150 yards for my last burst. I observed hits on the wings and fuselage, and shortly afterwards the engine quit and the propeller started wind-milling. I followed the FW 190 down and saw it crash-land. I noticed large pieces of it flying off as it crash-landed.'

After two straight days of aerial engagements it was beginning to appear that the Luftwaffe was possibly re-entering the fight, but that

proved not to be the case. Indeed, a further 18 missions were flown before another enemy aircraft was sighted and destroyed by a member of the 'Clan'. That event took place on 16 February during an escort mission to Neuburg airfield and the Rosenheim railway marshalling yard in Germany. The engagement took place at 1340 hrs while the 325th was escorting Liberators on the homeward bound leg of the mission. Lt Walter Selenger reported;

'I observed a lone B-24 being attacked by a FW 190 and immediately dived after it. I opened fire at 300 yards directly astern and closed to 160 yards, firing with no deflection. I saw many hits entering the engine, fuselage, cockpit and wings of the FW 190. Black smoke poured from the enemy aircraft, its wheels fell down and the pilot bailed out. Both aeroplane and pilot, whose 'chute did not open, went into the sea.'

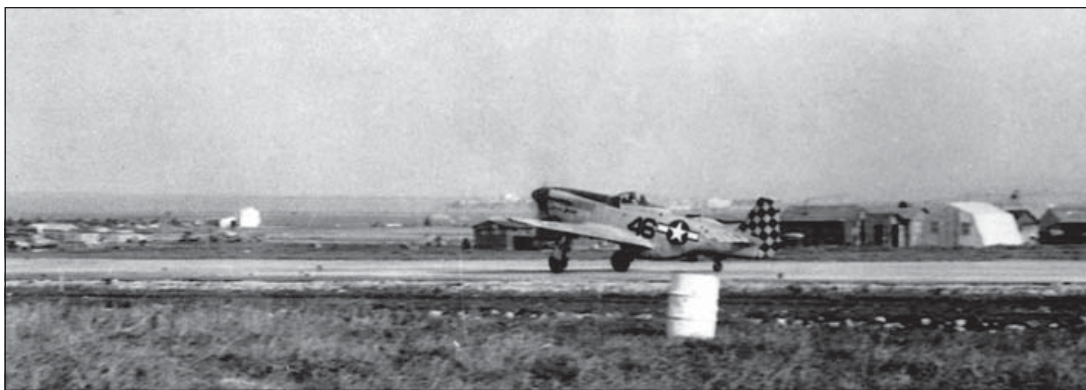
The next three missions were all uneventful, but on 19 February the 'Clan' discovered numerous strafing targets in the Vienna-Linz area of Austria. The mission summary stated;

'Seventeen P-51s strafed from St Polten to Amstettin, destroying four locomotives, one tank car, 13 M/T [Motor Transports] and 15 men. Eighteen P-51s strafed between Ybbs and Enns, destroying 18 locomotives, five tank cars and one M/T and damaging 92 freight cars and three barges. Sixteen P-51s strafed between Vienna and St Polten, destroying 19 locomotives, two freight cars, ten tank cars and three M/T and damaging three barges. All strafing was accomplished between 1130-1215 hrs. Four P-51s strafed Markersdorf airdrome at 1145 hrs, destroying one Do 217 and two FW 190s. Two P-51s were lost due to flak in the target area. Forty-eight P-51s down at base at 1415 hrs.'

The next five missions – all bomber or photo-reconnaissance escorts – were completed with the notation 'Mission completed without incident'. On 22 February the 'Clan' returned to strafing, attacking rail targets in the Munich area. The weather, however, was not totally cooperative due to heavy cloud cover, and the strafing was limited to targets in Salzburg, Austria. Here, 12 of the group's Mustangs found a hole in the clouds and succeeded in damaging an electric locomotive, 14 freight wagons and six passenger carriages, as well as a power station and motorised transport. Lt M J Wasser's Mustang was hit by flak during the strafing and he was forced to bail out, while Lt W H Taylor lost the coolant in his engine and crash-landed his fighter. Both pilots appeared to be safe, however.

The next 14 missions (again a mixture of escorts for photo-reconnaissance aircraft and bombers) were uneventful and without loss to the 325th FG. On 28 February the 'Clan' headed out for a strafing mission against rail targets between the Austrian cities of Innsbruck and Salzburg. This turned out to be only a partially successful mission, as just a single locomotive was destroyed. Two more were damaged, as were nine oil tank wagons and 13 box cars, but at the cost of one pilot and his aircraft.

March 1945 began with a move to Rimini airfield near Miramare, in Italy, and a much more successful mission. On 1 March the 'Clan' escorted B-24s to Moosbierbaum, in Austria. After the bomb run was completed the group left the Liberators near Lake Balaton to engage six enemy fighters at 22,000 ft. Before the 'smoke had cleared' five of the German fighters were confirmed as destroyed and the sixth was listed



as probably destroyed. The first victory of the day was claimed by Lt Carl Morey, who stated;

‘I attacked a Me 109 from the rear and opened fire from 350 yards with 20 degrees deflection and closed to within 250 yards, firing with no deflection. I saw many hits enter the wings and fuselage of the enemy aircraft, which burst into flames and started spinning down.’

At about the same time Lt Robert Newell bounced a Fw 190, reporting;

‘At an altitude of 10,000 ft I attacked a FW 190 from the rear and opened fire from 400 yards with 20 degrees deflection. I closed to 250 yards dead astern, opened fire and saw hits on the tail and fuselage of the FW 190, which burst into flames and crashed into the ground.’

At virtually the same time as the two previous kills Flt Off Bland M Barnes Jr latched onto the tail of another Fw 190. He described his victory in a more formal fashion;

‘While participating in a bomber escort to Moosbierbaum oil refineries, I, a wingman in a flight of four P-51s, turned to attack four Me 109s and two FW 190s coming in from the east at “0530 o’clock”. A Lufbery then evolved and I got on the tail of a FW 190 and closed to about 300 yards, firing short bursts. Many hits were seen entering the wings and fuselage of the enemy aircraft. The FW 190 split-essed from about 1500 ft, struck the ground and exploded.’

Fifteen minutes later Lt Morey added a second kill of the day to his scoreboard by closing on and destroying a Bf 109. The final victory of the mission was claimed by future ace William Aron, who reported his first victory as follows;

‘I was pursuing a FW 190 from an altitude of 400 ft and opened fire from 850 yards with 20 degrees deflection and closed to within 500 yards with no deflection. I saw a number of hits on the wing and the enemy aircraft chanelled up and the pilot bailed out. Lt Newell photographed the bail out and crash of the enemy aeroplane.’

The final claim was a probable scored by Lt G T Barnett over a Bf 109. All of the ‘Clan’s’ P-51s returned safely to base.

Following the Moosbierbaum engagements the Luftwaffe disappeared again during the next 16 missions (1 through 12 March). Since there was no action for the ‘Clan’ in the skies during this period, the mission for 13 March saw Mustangs sent to strafe railway-related targets in the Munich-Regensburg and Linz areas. However, when the pilots arrived in the target area an overcast prevented strafing. Not content to abort

Lt Bill Aron taxis P-51D 44-15128 Texas Jessie/Big Mike out for another mission in this undated photograph, possibly taken at Rimini. Aron claimed five victories and one damaged, all in this Mustang, between 1 March and 10 April 1945 before being shot down by flak in it on 22 April 1945 (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)



Lt Gordon McDaniel's P-51D 44-14467 was photographed at Mondolfo, in Italy, shortly after its pilot's ace-in-a-day experience on 14 March 1945. As seen here, the aircraft is partially decorated with six kill markings and new red wingtips, but the name *MARY MAC* has yet to be added. Unfortunately, after the name was added to the fighter McDaniel was only able to use it a few more times before the Mustang was lost with Lt Paul Murphy at the controls on 2 April 1945 (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth)

the mission, nine pilots searched until they found an opening in the cloud cover and strafed railway targets in the Munich, Landshut and Ingolstadt areas. Fourteen more located railway targets in Wiener-Neustadt. The combined totals of the strafing were 26 locomotives destroyed and 33 damaged, 29 freight wagons destroyed and 15 damaged, five passenger carriages damaged, 26 oil

tank wagons destroyed and 16 damaged, one power-house destroyed and one switch house damaged. A Bf 109 loaded on a flat wagon was also destroyed. One of the 'Clan's' pilots was seen to bail out of his crippled fighter during the strafing runs.

When the 325th took off at 1020 hrs on 14 March to escort B-24s attacking the railway marshalling yards at Nové Zámky, in Hungary, no one could have predicted the massive turn of events that would take place on the return trip. It all began when one of the 'Clan's' Mustangs developed trouble with its oxygen supply, forcing the pilot to dive down to a lower altitude. As he came out below the overcast he saw four Fw 190s and radioed for help. When the remainder of his flight dropped down to assist him they ran into a big gaggle of enemy aircraft.

A major dogfight began at around 19,000 ft, and Lt Robert Burns began the massacre of the Axis aircraft by quickly downing a Fw 190 (these fighters were almost certainly from the Hungarian Royal Air Force's 102. *Csatarepülő Osztály*). Next, Lt Gordon McDaniel came in behind a flight of eight or nine Fw 190s flying in a trail formation and took full advantage of the situation. Starting with the last fighter in the formation, he began shooting. Before the hapless pilots even realised what was happening Lt McDaniel had shot down five of them, thus raising his total to six.

Capt Harry Parker, who had only recently returned from leave, found two more Fw 190s at a lower altitude and recorded his 12th and 13th kills. He reported;

'When I attacked a FW 190 at 6000 ft it dived for the deck. I followed it down and opened fire from 1500 ft at 60 degrees deflection and closed to 50 ft dead astern. Many hits entered the fuselage and wings of the enemy aircraft, pieces of which fell off. The enemy aircraft went out of control and the pilot bailed out, but his 'chute failed to open. After downing this FW 190 I attacked another one at 5000 ft. I opened fire from about 4500 ft with 30 degrees deflection and closed to within 50 ft, using no deflection. I saw hits enter the wing roots and fuselage of the enemy aircraft, which went out of control and crashed to earth.'

With 13 victories Capt Parker was now in second place in the 325th's list of aces. Future ace Lt William Aron raised his total to three by downing two Fw 190s at about the same time that Capt Parker claimed his victories. Lt T M Bevan ripped into the remaining Fw 190s, destroying three of them for his first victories of his tour of duty. These kills only describe one half of the destruction suffered by the enemy during this mission. Capt D L

Voss and Lt J S Sutherland each destroyed a Bf 109, and single Fw 190s fell to Lts J B Henry, J G Pace, W K Selenger, R C Burns, P J Murphy and J W Barton. Two other enemy aircraft were claimed as probables and one as damaged. It was a tremendous victory for the 'Clan', whose total for the day was 20 victories, two probables and one damaged at a cost of two P-51s.

This air battle turned out to be the last large-scale dogfight of the war for the 325th.

Nevertheless, during the last weeks of the conflict enemy aircraft were encountered in smaller numbers on a few occasions, thus allowing the 'Clan' to continue to raise its victory count.

The first of these engagements came on 16 March when Lt J R Dytrych downed a Me 410 during a photo-reconnaissance escort mission to Ruhland, in Germany. Later that day both Capt G Smith and Lt T M Bevan downed a Bf 109. Two more were claimed on 20 March when Lts J C Wilkens and C W Morby downed a Fw 190 and a Bf 109 near Wels, in Czechoslovakia. On 26 March the 'Clan' headed into Czechoslovakia and Austria on a massive strafing mission and destroyed 31 locomotives, along with numerous other rolling stock. But the group paid a high price for this success when three Fw 190s intercepted the Mustangs as they were strafing and Lts R Caudill, V Kahl, J Willhite and L Inks were all shot down. One of the attacking Fw 190s was in turn chased down and destroyed by Flt Off Barnes.

2 April saw the 325th FG moving to its last wartime base at Mondolfo, in Italy, which it would share with the 31st FG. That same day the entire group took off to undertake a broad fighter sweep, the P-51s being broken up into A force, attacking targets from Ljubljana to Celje to Zweiweg to Bruck, and B force, attacking targets from Celje to Maribor to Graz. It turned out to be a mission of both triumph and tragedy for the 'Clan'. The strafing results were minimal, but an encounter with 15 enemy aircraft saw Maj Norman McDonald down two Bf 109s to raise his total to 10.5 kills. A third Bf 109 was sent crashing to earth by Lt G E Amedro. Unfortunately, these victories were dimmed by the disappearance of the group's second ranking ace, Capt Harry Parker. His wingman, Lt Sidney Rosenbloom, reported;

'I was flying as Capt Harry A Parker's wingman on 2 April on a strafing mission in the vicinity of Klagenfurt. Capt Parker observed a "bogey" below and called me, stating that he was going down to investigate. He ordered me to escort Lt Clifford Hill back to home base.' No one knows what happened to Capt Parker, and he is still listed as one of the missing. At the time of his death he had scored 13 victories during 273 missions with the 'Clan'.

Two days later the 325th flew another strafing mission, this time to the Regensburg-Munich-Linz areas, and it was quite successful against targets



Capt Harry Parker of the 318th FS scored his 13th, and final, victory on 14 March 1945, and his P-51D 44-14400 displays his final tally. Sadly, three weeks later Capt Parker (the 325th FG's second ranking ace) was killed in action over Austria (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)



The right side of Lt Bill Aron's P-51D 44-15128 before the name *Big Mike* was applied (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)

P-51D 44-63512 *Shu-Shu/Chuck O* was Maj Norman McDonald's last assigned Mustang during his tour of duty with the 318th FS. He scored his final three victories while flying this aircraft (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Tom Ivie)



on the ground and in the air. Five locomotives and several other freight wagons and oil tank wagons were destroyed. Upon completion of the strafing runs six Fw 190s were encountered, five of which were promptly shot down. Leading in the scoring was Lt W K Selenger with two of the Fw 190s, which increased his victory tally to four overall (he also had a damaged claim to his name). Lts Bill Aron, J G Howell and L F Seevers accounted for the remaining three kills. For future ace Bill Aron this

was his fourth victory, and he also claimed to have damaged the one surviving Fw 190 before it got away.

About 45 minutes later two Me 262s were encountered, and Lt W N Clark shot up one of them sufficiently enough to claim it as a probable. Lt W K Day damaged the second jet before it sped away.

On 6 April the 'Clan' again split into two separate groups to strafe targets in Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia. It duly destroyed 15 aircraft on the ground, nine locomotives and numerous other railway wagons, including four flat wagons carrying aircraft wing assemblies.

The next time the 'Clan' got to fire its guns was on 10 April during another strafing mission to the Regensburg, Munich and Passau areas. After destroying six locomotives and damaging a radio station, the Mustang pilots turned for home, whereupon they encountered nine enemy aircraft southeast of Linz. During the ensuing dogfight five Fw 190s were destroyed in the initial encounter and, ten minutes later, a Ju 88 was sent down in flames. Maj Norman McDonald destroyed one of the Fw 190s to raise his final score to 11.5 victories. The remaining four Focke-Wulfs were credited to Lts R D Christian, W W Forsyth, J E Mason and



J A Leonard. Lt Bill Aron became the 'Clan's' last ace when he destroyed a Ju 88 for his fifth, and final, victory. He reported his success as follows;

'I observed a Ju 88 flying at 8000 ft, and when I began my attack it went into a dive. I followed it down and opened fire from 1000 ft with 30 degrees deflection. Closing to 600 ft dead astern, I again opened fire. Many strikes were seen in the wing roots before the pilot belled the Ju 88 in and it burst into flames.'

The 'Clan's' guns remained silent until 18 April, when Maj Ralph Johnson destroyed a Me 262 during a freelance mission into the Regensburg-Munich area. More action followed the following day, when the 325th destroyed seven enemy aircraft. The first kill was credited to Lt Gertin, who had taken off on a test hop to slow time his Mustang's new engine. Whilst flying near Florence a single Fw 190 made a pass at him. Gertin turned into the attack and chased the fighter back to its airfield near Verona, whereupon he shot it down during its landing approach. Later in the day the 317th FS escorted the B-25s of the 340th BG in an attack on the Ora bridge in Italy. On the return trip eight Mustangs tangled with a gaggle of Bf 109s and sent six of them down in flames. Lt W F Baldwin downed two of the Messerschmitts, with the remaining Bf 109s being credited to Lts F W Schaefer, W B Bagley, J Barrett and F M Bolek.

Subsequent missions flown by the 'Clan' were reported as uneventful, but that did not mean without loss. On 22 April the group's final ace, Lt William Aron, was shot down by flak. He bailed out successfully but was murdered by hostile Italian civilians.

The victories of 19 April 1945 closed out the scoring for the 325th FG. During the Mustang era the group had flown 342 missions and scored 246 aerial victories for the loss of 75 fighters in combat. By war's end the 'Checkertail Clan's' final tally stood at 534 aerial victories. An additional 52 enemy aircraft were claimed as probable victories and another 281 aircraft were destroyed on the ground. Strafing victories also included 264 locomotives destroyed and 137 listed as probables. The 325th's 28 aces accounted for 201 of the aerial victories. The group lost 148 pilots during the course of 567 missions.

Lt William E Aron of the 318th FS. Downed by flak near Padua, in the Po River Valley, on 22 April whilst flying this aircraft, Aron was reportedly taken alive by local villagers and escorted away. No further information was ever given to his family about his fate, and his body was never recovered. It is believed that Aron was murdered in reprisal for the constant strafing attacks in the Po Valley (Dwayne Tabatt collection via Carl Molesworth)

APPENDICES

Aces of the 325th FG

Rank and Name	Squadron	Official Aerial Credits
Maj Herschel H Green	317th FS	18
Capt Harry A Parker	318th FS	13*
Maj Norman L McDonald	318th FS	11.5 (1)
Capt Wayne L Lowry	317th FS	11
Capt Frank J Collins	319th FS	9
Capt Richard W Dunkin	317th FS	9
Lt Eugene H Emmons	317th FS	9
Capt Arthur C Fiedler Jr	317th FS	8
Lt George P Novotny	317th FS	8
Lt Phillip Sangermano	318th FS	8*
Lt Robert H Brown	318th FS	7
Capt John M Simmons	317th FS	7
Lt Col Robert L Baseler	HQ and 325th FG	6
Lt Col Lewis W Chick	317th FS	6
Lt Barrie S Davis	317th FS	6
Lt Cecil O Dean	317th FS	6
Lt Benjamin H Emmert Jr	318th FS	6
Capt Roy B Hogg	318th FS	6
Lt Gordon H McDaniel	318th FS	6
Capt Ralph G Taylor Jr	317th FS	6
Lt William E Aron	318th FS	5*
Capt Robert M Barkey	319th FS	5
Lt Richard S Deakins	318th FS	5*
Capt Raymond E Hartley Jr	319th FS	5 (2)
Lt Cullen J Hoffman	317th FS	5
Lt Edsel Paulk	317th FS	5
Capt William A Bynne	319th FS	5
Capt Walter B Walker	317th FS	5

Key

* Killed in Action

(1) Maj McDonald scored 7.5 victories with the 52nd FG

(2) Capt Hartley scored three victories with the 353rd FG

1

P-40F-20 41-20006 MORTIMER SNERD/STUD of Lt Col Robert Baseler, 325th FG CO, Mateur, Tunisia, August 1943
Baseler scored five of his victories in this aircraft. It was later damaged, repaired and repainted black with red trim and modified by removing two of its guns, radio and other items in an attempt to increase its chances of reaching high-flying Axis aircraft.

2

P-40L-1 42-10436 Duchess of Durham IV of Capt Ralph G 'Zack' Taylor, 317th FS, Mateur, Tunisia, August 1943
Capt Taylor, who served as Operations Officer for the 317th FS, became the 'Checkertail Clan's' first ace when he downed three enemy aircraft on 20 July 1943 to boost his tally to six confirmed victories. Five of the six kills were scored while flying this aircraft, which had originally carried number 11 on its fuselage. After being shot up badly in P-40 number 13 Herschel Green wanted no further contact with 'unlucky 13' and Taylor agreed to switch aircraft numbers with him. 42-10436 was passed on to the 324th FG following its service with the 325th FG.

3

P-40F-15 41-19896 of Lt Walter B 'Bud' Walker, 317th FS, Mateur, Tunisia, August 1943
Lt Walker joined the 325th FG in January 1943, and on 30 July that same year he became its third ace. On that date he scored three victories during an aerial battle over Sardinia in this P-40, increasing his overall tally to five. He suffered a wound during the dogfight of 30 July and received a Purple Heart during Bob Hope's USO show at Mateur in August 1943. A few weeks later Walker completed his tour of duty and headed home for a well deserved leave.

4

P-47D (serial unknown) The Star of Altoona of Capt Bunn Hearn, HQ 325th FG, Foggia, Italy, January 1944
The two kill markings applied to this aircraft denote Capt Hearn's victories in P-40s during June and July 1943. *The Star of Altoona*, however, gained its fame for being the aircraft that 'Herky' Green was using when he scored six victories during a fighter sweep to Villaorba, Italy, on 30 January 1944. On that date he downed four Ju 52/3ms, a C.202 and a Do 217. Green could have probably increased his score if he had known that *The Star of Altoona's* guns had been loaded with 800 rounds per weapon instead of the normal load of 400 rounds that he usually carried in his assigned P-47 '11'.

5

P-47D-16 42-76021 Rocky of Lt Col Lewis W Chick, 317th FS CO, Lesina, Italy, March 1944
Bill Chick came to the 325th FG as a very experienced P-47 pilot who had flown operationally in England with the 4th and 355th FGs. He was one of three veteran pilots sent from the Eighth Air Force to help with the 325th FG's transition from P-40s to P-47s, and proved to be both an exceptional teacher and leader. While serving as CO of the 317th FS he scored six victories in P-47s, two of them in his *Rocky*.

6

P-47D (serial unknown) of Maj Herschel H 'Herky' Green, 317th FS CO, Lesina, Italy, May 1944
Maj Green, with 18 victories to his name, was the 325th FG's highest scoring ace. He was also a popular and respected leader. Green replaced Bill Chick as CO of the 317th FS, and held this

position for the remainder of his tour of duty with the 'Checkertail Clan'. After barely escaping with his life on his first combat mission, Green took the fight to his Axis counterparts and made them pay a high price for their near victory over him on 19 May 1943. He scored three victories in the P-40, ten in the P-47 and his final five in the P-51 Mustang, making him one of the few USAAF pilots to claim kills in three different types of aircraft.

7

P-47D-6 42-74957 of Lt Cecil O Dean, 317th FS, Lesina, Italy, May 1944

Lt Dean began his flying career as a flying sergeant in September 1942, before becoming a flight officer in December 1942 then joining the 325th FG as one of its original combat pilots. He scored his first victory in the P-40 in July 1943 and his next three in the P-47 on 30 January 1944. Dean received a commission on 2 April 1944 and scored his final two victories in a P-51B. He was involved in a mid-air collision on 2 July 1944 and spent the remainder of the conflict as a PoW.

8

P-47D-16 42-75737 HUN HUNTER of Lt Eugene Emmons, 317th FS, Lesina, Italy, May 1944

Lt Emmons joined the 317th FS in late July 1943 but remained scoreless while flying the P-40. With the advent of the P-47 he made up for lost time by scoring all nine of his victories between 30 January and 13 May 1944. Four of Emmons' nine kills were scored while flying this aircraft.

9

P-47D-16 42-75971 Ruthless Ruthie/Lady Janie VI of Lt George Novotny, 317th FS, Lesina, Italy, April 1944

Lt George Novotny was another 317th FS ace that commenced his combat tour flying P-40s, scoring three victories with the Curtiss fighter before converting to the P-47. Novotny's aggressiveness continued into the Thunderbolt era, as he downed five more enemy aircraft before his tour of duty ended. Three of his P-47 victories were scored while flying this aircraft. After Lt Novotny's departure from the 325th FG, future ace Lt John Simmons inherited this aircraft and flew it until the group converted to Mustangs.

10

P-47D-15 42-75829 GINGER of Capt William A Rynne, 317th FS, Lesina, Italy, March 1944

Capt Rynne joined the 325th FG just prior to its conversion to Thunderbolts, which meant that he had little operational time in the P-40. The big Thunderbolt seemed to be just what he needed, and he scored the first two of his five victories on 31 January 1944. A third followed on 14 February, and Rynne closed out his scoring on 11 March when he downed two Bf 109s and was credited with a probable for a third Messerschmitt. As a result of his aggressiveness and leadership skills, Capt Rynne was given command of the 319th FS on 20 March. His tenure as CO lasted just nine days, however, for he was shot down in a dogfight south of Venice on 29 March 1944 and became a PoW.

11

P-47D (serial unknown) Little Sir Echo of Lt Edsel Paulk, 317th FS, Lesina, Italy, April 1944

Edsel Paulk reported in to the 325th FS as a flight officer in June 1943, and he was later commissioned as a second lieutenant. His road to becoming an ace began when the 'Checkertail Clan'

converted to P-47s, Lt Paulk scoring all five of his victories with the Thunderbolt between 19 January and 12 April 1944. He completed his tour of duty with the 317th FS in July 1944.

12

P-47D (serial unknown) of Capt Frank 'Spot' Collins, 319th FS, Lesina, Italy, January 1944

Capt Collins scored his first kill on 6 May 1943 during the final days of the Tunisian campaign, and added four more during the fighting over Sardinia, Pantelleria and Sicily. Three of his Warhawk victories were scored while flying P-40F 41-19966. When the 'Clan' converted to P-47s Capt Collins continued his scoring spree by downing four more enemy aircraft (all Bf 109s, and he was also credited with a probable Messerschmitt too), giving him a total of nine kills, one probable and one damaged by the time he finished his tour of duty. This aircraft was allegedly christened *LULU*, but the name was never painted onto the P-47.

13

P-47D-16 42-75971 Ruthless Ruthie/Lady Janie VI of Lt John Simmons, 317th FS, Lesina, Italy, May 1944

This aircraft was quite successful during its stay with the 317th FS, with Lt Novotny scoring three of his P-47 kills in it. Future ace Lt Simmons failed to claim a victory with it, however – all seven of his kills would come flying the P-51. When 42-75971 was transferred to the 332nd FG in late May 1944 the P-47 suffered a disastrous fate. Its new pilot, Lt Lloyd 'Scottie' Hathcock, became disoriented during the mission of 29 May and landed it totally intact on an enemy airfield near Rome, where he and his fighter were quickly captured.

14

P-47D-23 42-75008 BIG STUD of Lt Col Robert L Baseler, 325th FG CO, Lesina, Italy, April 1944

Lt Col Baseler joined the 325th FG in August 1942 and served as CO of the 319th FS until November of that year, when he became group Executive Officer and Operations Officer. Promoted to group CO in July 1943, he scored the last of six victories (a Ju 88) while flying *BIG STUD*. Baseler's final tally was six destroyed, three probables and three damaged.

15

P-51C-1 42-103324 of Maj Herschel H 'Herky' Green, 317th FS CO, Lesina, Italy, June 1944

Maj Green flew this Mustang on the Shuttle Mission to Russia in June 1944 and several other missions before replacing it with a P-51D in early July 1944. His record while flying the C-model Mustang was two destroyed and two damaged, but he only claimed one of his damaged credits in this particular aircraft. Green's remaining credits while flying the P-51B/C were one kill and one damaged in P-51B '38' and one kill and one damaged in P-51C '31'. His score at this point was 15 kills, one probable and four damaged. 42-103324 was destroyed in a crash on 24 February 1945.

16

P-51B-15 42-106943 of Lt Benjamin H Emmert Jr, 318th FS, Lesina, Italy, June 1944

Prior to his assignment to the 325th FG in January 1944, Lt Emmert had flown a tour in P-39s with the 154th Reconnaissance Squadron. While flying the P-47 Emmert was credited with a G.55 destroyed and a Bf 109 probable. He scored his first Mustang victory in 42-106943 (fitted with a fin leading edge extension) on 11 June 1944. Two weeks later Emmert was assigned P-51D-5 44-13288, and he claimed four more victories with this machine before being shot down by flak on 1 September 1944 and becoming a PoW. 42-106943 had by then been transferred to the 332nd FG. Emmert's final score

in World War 2 was six destroyed, one probable and one damaged, and he claimed another one destroyed and one damaged while flying F-86As in Korea in 1951.

17

P-51C-5 42-103562 Little Bastard of Lt Robert H Brown, 318th FS, Lesina, Italy, July 1944

Lt Brown began his scoring in the P-51C in a big way with three kills and a probable over Bucharest on 28 June 1944, but they were claimed in a 'borrowed aircraft'. His only victory in *Little Bastard* came on 27 July when he downed a Bf 109 over Budapest. Brown's next three successes were also scored in 'borrowed' aircraft, and his final total was seven kills, one probable and one damaged. Lt Verner Woodman inherited *Little Bastard* from Brown, and he scored one of his four victories in it on 23 August. The aircraft was lost on 17 November with Lt Lawrence Schachner at the controls.

18

P-51C-10 42-103867 SHIMMY III of Lt Col Chester L 'Chet' Sluder, 325th FG CO, Lesina, Italy, June 1944

Lt Col Sluder did not qualify as an ace since he was only credited with two aerial victories, but his leadership between 1 April and 23 August 1944 was inspired. Indeed, it was one of the primary reasons why the 'Clan' enjoyed such success against a determined enemy. Sluder led 64 Mustangs on the Shuttle Mission to Russia in this aircraft in a flawless manner on 2 June 1944. He scored his only Mustang victory four days later while leading a mission from the Russian airfield at Pyriatin to Galati, in Rumania. After a five-day delay due to weather, he led his men back to Lesina from Russia on 11 June 1944.

19

P-51C-5 42-103581 Mary Norris of Lt Phillip Sangermano, 318th FS, Lesina, Italy, August 1944

Lt Sangermano was assigned to the 318th FS near the end of May 1944, and within two months of his arrival he was already an ace with six victories to his credit. He completed his scoring on 23 August 1944 when he downed two Fw 190s and damaged a third Focke-Wulf during a mission to Austria, raising his totals to eight kills and one damaged. Five of his eight victories were scored while flying this aircraft – it is not known if the name *Mary Norris* was ever actually painted onto the Mustang. Sadly, Lt Sangermano lost his life on 9 December 1944 when he took off in P-51C 42-103410 for a local test flight and disappeared. It was later learned that he was jumped by enemy aircraft and shot down, an Italian family caring for the mortally wounded ace until he passed away.

20

P-51B-15 43-24822 of Lt Richard Deakins, 318th FS, Lesina, Italy, June 1944

Lt Deakins joined the 325th FG at the end of December 1943, and by 13 April 1944 he had scored three victories in his P-47D 42-75824. After the conversion to Mustangs he quickly added two more victories during June 1944, both of which were scored in this aircraft. Deakins died in a flying accident in a P-47 on 24 November 1944.

21

P-51B-5 43-6861 Funnyface of Lt Oscar Rau, 318th FS, Lesina, Italy, November 1944

Lt Oscar Rau never became an ace with the 'Checkertail Clan' but he made a determined effort to do so when he downed four Bf 109s within 20 minutes whilst at the controls of this aircraft near Lake Balaton on 5 November 1944.

22

P-51B-15 43-24877 *Penrod* of Capt Roy Hogg, 318th FS, Lesina, Italy, June 1944

Capt Hogg joined the 325th FG in March 1943 and subsequently became one of the few USAAF pilots to score victories in three different types of fighter. He claimed his first two victories in June and July 1943 in P-40s, then added two more in January 1944 in a P-47 and finished his scoring on 6 June 1944 when he destroyed two Fw 190s while flying this particular Mustang.

23

P-51B-15 43-24857 *Dorothy-II* of Capt Robert M Barkey, 319th FS, Lesina, Italy, June 1944

Bob Barkey was assigned to the 325th FG in late 1943 during the unit's conversion from P-40s to P-47s, and he soon found the Thunderbolt to be an excellent mount. Between 22 January and 24 May 1944 he downed four Bf 109s, and later added a probable victory over a C.202 before switching to this Mustang. Barkey claimed the last kill of his war in 43-24857 on 6 June 1944, and two weeks later he was sent home to participate in a War Bond Drive.

24

P-51B-15 43-24893 of Capt Raymond E Hartley Jr, 319th FS CO, Lesina, Italy, June 1944

Capt Hartley was assigned to the 325th FG in December 1943 and commanded the 319th FS from 28 March through to June 1944. During his tour of duty with the squadron he was credited with two kills and one damaged. Hartley left the 'Clan' in August 1944, and following a Stateside leave he flew a second tour with the Eighth Air Force's 353rd FG. On 24 March 1945 he shot down three enemy aircraft and damaged a fourth to take his final tally to five destroyed and two damaged.

25

P-51D-5 44-13336 *THISIZIT* of Capt Richard Dunkin, 317th FS, Lesina, Italy, August 1944

Capt Dunkin flew two tours with the 325th FG. During his first he destroyed four enemy aircraft while flying both the P-40 and the P-47. Upon his return to the 325th in July 1944 Dunkin continued his scoring ways by destroying four Bf 109s (with a fifth as a probable) and a Fw 190. His total stood at nine kills and one probable by the end of his second tour.

26

P-51D-5 44-13498 *Miss Ridge* of Maj Herschel H Green, 317th FS CO, Lesina, Italy, July 1944

Maj Green scored his last three victories in this aircraft (which bore the name *Miss Ridge* on the right side of its nose), destroying two Bf 109s and a Fw 190. At some point between his 17th (14 July) and 18th (23 August) victories a fin strake was added to this aircraft.

27

P-51D (serial number unknown) *My Gal Sal* of Lt Wayne Lowry, 317th FS, Lesina, Italy, August 1944

Although Lt Lowry was assigned to the 325th FG in January 1944, it would be almost six months before his run of victories commenced on 6 June 1944. By 7 August he had amassed a total of 11 aircraft destroyed and two probables, with the last

five kills being scored in this aircraft. Lowry became a PoW on 7 October 1944 after running out of fuel during a mission.

28

P-51D-5 44-13451 *Bee* of Lt Barrie S Davis, 317th FS, Lesina, Italy, August 1944

Lt Davis joined the 325th FG in late March 1944, and by 22 August he was an ace with six victories to his credit. Four of his kills were scored in this aircraft. Davis finished his tour of duty and returned to the US in November 1944.

29

P-51D-5 44-13322 *Devastating Dottie/Miss Janie VIII* of Lt John M Simmons Jr, 317th FS, Lesina, Italy, August 1944

Lt Simmons joined the 325th FG in the spring of 1944 and scored the first of his seven victories on 23 June in a 'borrowed' Mustang. His remaining six kills, however, were all scored in 44-13322.

30

P-51D-5 44-13777 *Helen* of Capt Arthur C Fiedler Jr of the 317th FS, Lesina, Italy, September 1944

'Art' Fiedler was assigned to the 325th FG on 20 May 1944, and he scored his first kill on 28 June – he made ace within a month. Between 15 September 1944 and 20 January 1945 he added three more victories, and his final total was eight destroyed and one probable. Four of Fiedler's kills were scored in this aircraft.

31

P-51D-10 44-14467 *MARY MAC* of Lt Gordon H McDaniel, 318th FS, Rimini, Italy, March 1945

Lt McDaniel was assigned to the 325th FG in September 1944 and he scored his first victory on 19 January 1945. After a two month dry spell he quickly became an 'ace-in-a-day' by destroying five Fw 190s on 14 March 1945. All six of McDaniel's victories were scored in this Mustang.

32

P-51D-16 44-15128 *Texas Jessie/Big Mike* of Lt William E Aron, 318th FS, Rimini, Italy, March 1945

Lt Aron began his tour of duty with the 325th in early November 1944, and he would have to wait almost four months to begin his scoring spree. He claimed his first success on 1 March 1945, and by 10 April Aron had raised his total to five destroyed and one damaged, all of which were claimed in this aircraft. Downed by flak near Padua, in the Po River Valley, on 22 April whilst flying 44-15128, Aron was reportedly taken alive by local villagers and escorted away. No further information was ever given to his family about his fate, and his body was never recovered. It is believed that Aron was murdered in reprisal for the constant strafing attacks in the Po Valley.

33

P-51D-10 44-14400 of Capt Harry A Parker, 318th FS, Rimini, Italy, March 1945

This Mustang was the last of three P-51Ds assigned to Capt Parker, and he scored his final two victories with it on 14 March 1945. Parker had joined the 325th in May 1944, and during two tours he became the 'Clan's' second highest scoring ace with 13 victories and seven damaged claims to his name. He was killed on 2 April 1945 during his 237th mission.

34

P-51D-20 44-63512 *Shu-Shu/Chuck O* of Maj Norman McDonald, 318th FS CO, Mondolfo, Italy, April 1945

Maj McDonald was already a 75-victory ace (claimed while flying Spitfires with the 52nd FG) by the time he joined the 325th FG during the autumn of 1944. This Mustang was the second of two assigned to him, and he added four more victories to his total while flying 44-63512. His final victory count was 11.5 kills, two probables and four damaged.

35

P-51D (serial unknown) of Lt Cullen Hoffman, 317th FS, Lesina, Italy, June 1944

Lt Hoffman joined the 325th FG in October 1943, and between

31 January and 13 June 1944 he downed five enemy aircraft (and damaged a sixth) in P-47s and P-51Bs. This was his last assigned aircraft, but it never scored a kill with Hoffman at the controls.

36

Bf 109G *Hoimann*, flown by Lt Col Bob Baseler, 325th FG CO, Mateur, Tunisia, June 1943

This aircraft was captured intact and airworthy by the 'Clan' in North Africa and repainted flat black with red trim. After the P-38 Lightning-equipped 14th FG attacked the 325th's P-40 Warhawks by mistake, Lt Col Bob Baseler beat up the airfield of the nearest Lightning group (which was home to the 1st FG) that evening in this fighter in an effort to help with the pilots' Axis aircraft recognition!

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Front Cover

On 14 March 1945 the 325th FG escorted bombers from the Fifteenth Air Force on a raid against the railway marshalling yards in the Hungarian town of Nové Zámky. The 'Checkertail Clan' had taken off at 1020 hrs and accompanied the bombers to the target. No one could have anticipated the turn of events after an uneventful escort to Nové Zámky. The action commenced when one of the returning Mustang pilots experienced problems with his oxygen supply and dived to a lower altitude. As he broke through the undercast, he saw four Fw 190s and radioed for help. When the remainder of his flight dropped down to assist him they ran into a large gaggle of enemy aircraft and a major dogfight ensued. During the next 15 minutes seven Fw 190s were shot down, five of them by Lt Gordon McDaniel.

By now the action had dropped to a lower altitude, and Capt Harry Parker (flying P-51D-5 44-14400) entered the fray and attacked a Fw 190 at 6000 ft. The enemy aircraft dived for the deck, and Parker followed. He opened fire at a distance of 1500 ft and closed to 50 ft, dead astern. His gunfire ripped pieces from the fuselage and wings, and as the Fw 190 started to go out of control its pilot bailed out, but his parachute did not open. Immediately after this kill Parker attacked another Fw 190 at 5000 ft, opening fire from 4500 ft and again closing to within 50 ft of his opponent. Parker noted, 'I saw hits enter the wings and fuselage of the enemy aircraft, which went out of control and crashed to earth'. With these two victories Capt Harry Parker, who had recently returned from leave in the US, raised his victory tally to 13. He was now the 'Checkertail Clan's' second-ranking ace.

By the time the dogfight had ended the pilots of the 325th had claimed 20 Fw 190s destroyed (these aircraft were almost certainly from the Hungarian Royal Air Force's 102. Csatarepülő Osztály) for the loss of two Mustangs.

Sadly, Capt Parker's victories would be his last, for he disappeared on 2 April 1945 after going down to investigate an enemy aircraft. No trace of him or his aircraft were ever found (Cover artwork by Mark Postlethwaite)

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